

Changing the Mentorship Paradigm: Survey Data and Interpretations from Forensic Anthropology Practitioners



Allysha Powanda Winburn^{1,2}, Audrey L. Scott³, Cate E. Bird⁴, and Sean D. Tallman⁵

¹C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory, University of Florida; ²Dept. of Anthropology, University of New Hampshire; ³Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency;

⁴Florida Institute of Forensic Anthropology & Applied Science, University of South Florida; ⁵Dept. of Anatomy and Neurobiology, Boston University



INTRODUCTION

This poster presents survey-based data on current perceptions of the roles of mentors and protégés within the field of forensic anthropology. It is hoped that these data will inform future mentor-protégé interactions and guide forensic scientists to focus on the positive influence that mentorship can have – not only on protégés' careers, but also on the personal development of the mentor and the overall wellbeing of the field.

HISTORY OF THE MENTORSHIP CONCEPT

The concept of mentorship originated in ancient Greek mythology and referred to a relationship between a knowledgeable person (mentor) and a less-experienced person (protégé). The term “mentor” gained traction in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, after its popularization by French educator Francois de Salignac de La Mothe-Fenelon in depicting the mythical character of “Mentor” as a wise and supportive advisor (Roberts 1999). Today, mentorship can be conceptualized as the informal transmission of knowledge over a sustained period of time and in a domain in which the mentor and protégé have unequal knowledge (Bozeman and Feeney 2007). This concept of mentoring takes place during a sustained period and must be perceived by the protégé to be directly relevant to work, career, and/or professional development. Individuals in supervisory positions may qualify as mentors, but mentorship goes beyond the expected obligatory roles of work supervision and often occurs as a result of informal social exchange (Bozeman and Feeney 2007).

Traditionally, mentors are seen as older, wiser advisors who provide counsel to younger, less-experienced individuals in their professional or social sphere. Certainly, the role of this high-level mentor has been paramount in developing the field of forensic anthropology. However, anyone with greater knowledge in a specific domain who exerts a positive influence on another individual's professional or social development can be considered a mentor – regardless of age or experience. This presentation contends that peer-to-peer interactions (e.g., leading by example, sharing diverse work experiences, dispensing advice) also qualify as important mentorship behaviors (*sensu* Eby 1997).

MATERIALS & METHODS

This research explores how the roles of mentors and protégés are perceived throughout the diverse academic and applied contexts in the field of forensic anthropology. All users of the AAFA Anthropology Section listserv received a link to an anonymous, IRB-approved Qualtrics.com survey. Instructions encouraged participants to share the survey link with other practitioners of varying skill and experience levels, including students and other non-members. Consenting participants answered 23 multiple-choice and 12 open-answer questions regarding their demographic information, opinions about mentorship, and experiences as both mentors and protégés.

A total of 96 professional forensic anthropologists and anthropology graduate students participated in the survey. The majority specialized in biological anthropology (85%), had completed a PhD (56%), worked in the academic (57%) or medical-examiner setting (33%), and/or were students (38%). Most had been in the field for fewer than 21 years (85%; median time in field, 6-10 years) and were under the age of 45 years (81%; median age group, 30-34 years). The majority (75%) identified as gender female, woman, or “xx”; the remainder identified as male or “M”. Most identified as: Anglo, Caucasian, European, or White (85%); Asian, Korean, or South Asian (4%); or Hispanic, Latina/o, or Mexican-American (4%). Other ancestral/ethnic/racial groups were represented by 2% of respondents or less.

Mentorship: the person-to-person transmission of knowledge in a domain where one person has more experience than the other.

Respondents valued peer (68%) as well as advisor mentors (86%)

Peers were also the most common category of protégé (75%)

“Mentorship should go beyond advising. It involves leading by example, providing tailored guidance, professional support, and a genuine interest in the well-being of the protégé. These can exist in **peer mentorship** as well as traditional mentorships.” –Anonymous Respondent

Forensic anthropology mentorship focuses on career/professionalism. Respondents wished for more mentorship in social interactions/issues, though most were satisfied overall with their mentorship experiences.

“We need to foster a better mentor-protégé environment in our field- it feels unnecessarily competitive at times.” –Anonymous Respondent

Most respondents and mentors were under 50 years of age. 75% of respondents identified as women, 85% as “white.” 62% perceived their primary mentors as men; 100% perceived at least one mentor to be “white.”

REFERENCES

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QR Code goes here. It'll link to my academia.edu site, which'll have document with survey responses

RESULTS

Importance of Mentorship in Forensic Anthropology

Respondents were nearly unanimous regarding the importance of mentorship in forensic anthropology (96% “definitely” or “probably”), and many felt that being mentored directly contributed to their career success (92% “definitely” or “probably”). Nearly all respondents had benefitted from multiple mentors (99% “definitely” or “probably”). Many had also mentored multiple protégés (92% “definitely” or “probably”).

Mentor and Protégé Demographics

As expected, most respondents reported being mentored by a thesis/dissertation advisor (86%). However, many respondents also reported peers as an important category of mentor (68%), and peers were the most commonly reported category of protégé (75%). Most respondents perceived their primary mentor's gender as male/man (62%), and 100% had mentors they perceived to be “white” or European. More mentors were younger than 50 years of age (70%) than were older than 50 years (49%; overlap due to multiple mentors).

Career vs. Social Mentorship

More respondents had received mentorship in career-related areas than they had in social interactions and social issues (e.g., 91% technical skill; 83% academics; 80% career path; 76% professionalism; vs. 57% “networking” and 21% minority representation). Likewise, when asked for areas in which they desired additional mentorship, more respondents chose social categories (26% social interactions; 23% social issues) than career-related categories (15% career path; 6% technical skill; 5% professionalism; 2% academics). Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) also wished they had provided their own protégés with more mentorship in navigating social issues.

Still, differences between distributions for mentorship provided/received and additional desired mentorship provided/received were not statistically significant ($\alpha=0.05$; Wilcoxon rank-sum test; R Core Team). Further, the most commonly selected category for additional desired mentorship (both received [37%] and provided [40%]) was “none” – implying overall satisfaction with the mentorship experience.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that the traditional mentorship paradigm is already evolving. In forensic anthropology, the mentorship paradigm does not solely consist of vertical-level interactions, but often includes horizontally oriented interactions. Mirroring the study sample, forensic anthropology mentors are frequently under 50 years of age; however, while most respondents were women, mentors remain primarily men. There also seems to be a slight mismatch between the racial/ethnic diversity of mentors and respondents. While most forensic anthropologists are satisfied with the mentorship they have received and provided, the future of mentorship in the field could benefit from the inclusion of increased guidance in social interactions and social issues, as well as career and professionalism – especially by and for racially/ethnically diverse individuals.

If our future reflects our past, then we must honor the long-valued (and still valuable) role of the traditional mentor, while emphasizing the non-traditional mentorship behaviors that can enhance the careers and lives of both trainees and experienced practitioners.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & NOTES

Many thanks to the respondents who participated in this survey! For detailed information on survey responses, please scan the QR code to the left, or email: allysha.winburn@unh.edu.