Mentoring for Social Change:

Challenges and Future Directions for PhD Mentoring in South Africa

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on my experiences of mentoring within PhD programmes over the past 18 years. Drawing on autoethnographic methods, I aim to critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities of mentorship programmes in the South African context. I identify 5 areas of debate that are central to better understanding mentorship programmes. These are: the management of mentorship programmes, the mainstreaming of mentorship within PhD programmes, the relationship between mentorship and supervision, the relationship between mentorship and transformation and the risks inherent to mentorship programmes. Based on these reflections I recommend a research agenda that can lead to more clearly conceptualised mentorship programmes and can better evaluate their impact both on PhD candidates and the broader transformation of the academy.

Keywords: mentorship, supervision, PhD, academia, Southern Africa, transformation

1. Introduction

In this article, I identify some challenges and opportunities for PhD mentorship in South Africa and suggest a research agenda to improve the design and evaluation of mentorship programmes. South Africa has experienced a rapid growth in the number of PhD candidates since democracy, alongside a need for transformation of many aspects of the academy, including staff composition, curriculum and institutional culture. Mentorship has often been put forward as one way of achieving this transformation. However, there is little clarity on what form it should take and what outcomes are anticipated. This article draws from a review of the existing literature on PhD mentorship and autoethnographic reflections from PhD development work I have done for the past 18 years. I suggest five key themes that need to be considered in the design and evaluation of mentorship programmes. These are the management of mentorship programmes, the mainstreaming of mentorship within PhD programmes, the relationship between mentorship and transformation, the relationship between mentorship and supervision and the possible risks inherent to mentorship. Based on these themes, I make recommendations for a future research agenda that can inform South African PhD mentorship programmes and those in other contexts undergoing rapid social change.

1.1 The Growth of Mentorship in PhD Programmes

Mentorship in PhD programmes has been a topic of growing research interest. This emerging literature shows an overwhelmingly positive sentiment towards mentorship for PhD students (The term PhD student and PhD candidate are used on somewhat different ways in South African academia. I am therefore using them interchangeably to refer to all doctoral students regardless of the stage of study) with large (although sometimes unsubstantiated) claims about its positive effects. Mentorship is proposed as a mechanism that can reduce non-completion rates, improve the quality of PhD training, socialise early career academics into the processes, norms and culture of academia and improve the psychosocial well-being of doctoral students (see Baker, 2014; Leao et al 2015; Liu, 2019; Fam and Lee, 2019). As a result of these benefits, Lunsford (2012) notes that the US spends millions on mentoring for doctoral students every year. Despite this positive sentiment, there are many unanswered questions about what factors make for a successful PhD mentorship programme and the extent to which these are common across contexts. These questions include how we might define mentorship, what form it should take, what outcomes we hope for and how we can measure and evaluate its impact (Baker, 2014; Lorenzetti, 2019). Additionally, but not often mentioned in the literature, there is a question about what forms of mentorship might work in different disciplines given their different research practices and norms.

To date, much of the literature that exists is from the sciences (Berdahl, 2022) and business studies, with a smaller but significant body of literature from fields such as public health or nursing (Lewensky, 2017). Furthermore, the existing studies tend to be small-scale and focused on a single PhD programme (see Himler, 2007, for a notable exception). This situation is even more extreme outside of the global north and particularly in contexts where PhD programmes are small-scale and under-resourced. In South Africa, where this author is based, mentorship has been taking place with varying purposes, outcomes, and structures. As I describe below, this means that the lessons from the global north may not easily apply in South Africa. This article draws from autoethnographic reflections on the experiences I have had from 18 years of PhD development and mentoring work and proposes a research agenda to better understand the role that mentorship can play in PhD programmes.

1.2 What is Mentorship?

What is clear across all the literature is that mentorship is more than PhD supervision. In particular, it involves 'softer', often difficult to measure, constructs such as integration and socialisation into the academy that go beyond the PhD research. For Mollica (2014), a mentor is anyone who is beneficial to one's academic, professional and personal development. However, most authors take a more limited definition than this. For example, Lunsford (2012) argues that mentorship is different to supervision because its primary purpose is to provide career development and psychosocial support.

Berdhal (2022), in a study of a Canadian PhD programme, argued that supervisors are finding themselves increasingly playing a mentorship role in that supervisors are increasingly providing career advice and professional development advice that goes beyond supervising a research project. They claim that this is a shift from previous generations of PhD students who experienced very 'hands-off' and project-focused supervision styles. Nevertheless, they rightly point out that there are many different supervision styles, ranging from laissez-faire supervision to pastoralist or contractual approaches. Therefore, they argue that there is a clear continuum of supervision practices that range from a total focus on research training to those that also provide professional socialisation and those that provide personal development and psychosocial support. Thus, to some extent, mentorship is already part of many supervision activities even if the extent of it varies.

Whilst these descriptions are helpful, they often lack specificity and provide only vague references to terms such as development, support and socialisation. One contrast is Chen (2016), who systematically reviewed the measurement techniques used to evaluate mentoring. They found 22 scales used to measure mentorship, which covered two primary domains: career development and psychosocial support. These were then broken down into 9 behaviours, which were sponsorship, role modelling, exposure and visibility, acceptance and confirmation, coaching, counselling, challenging assignments, and friendship and protection. However, they note that these scales come almost entirely from mentorship practices within industry, and their transferability to higher education is unknown. The closest model of mentorship in higher education is the now quite dated work of Shannon (1988), who mentions sponsoring, encouraging, counselling and befriending as key dimensions of mentorship in higher education. Crisp and Cruz (2009) add degree and career support, academic subject knowledge and role modelling as additional dimensions of academic mentoring. Berdahl (2022) focuses on practical mentorship activities and finds that the most common form of mentoring involves employing students as research assistants, providing conference funding, and to a lesser extent providing guidance on grant funding, including students on funding applications and co-authorship. Together, most literature sees mentorship as a combination of psychosocial support, practical career assistance and role modelling. However, the focus of different studies varies considerably. What is clear is that we lack a consistent conceptualisation of mentorship in higher education and its relationship to other key roles that support PhD candidates (Chen 2016).

1.3 What are the Different Forms that Mentorship can Take?

The above discussion shows that, in many instances, it is assumed that the mentor is also the student's supervisor. However, in some instances, PhD candidates may have separate mentors in addition to their supervisors. These separate mentorship models take various forms, ranging from highly formalised mentorship arrangements (Manabe, 2018) to completely informal arrangements that emerge organically within an institution (Mazerolle, 2015). Many mentorship interventions involve a doctoral candidate being paired with a senior academic mentor. The assumption is that the senior academic will advise the early career researcher on the norms and values of academia and assist them to make decisions about their career (Lunsford, 2012).

In contrast, peer mentorship has been commonly used as a form of doctoral support (see Lewenski, 2017). Lorenzetti (2019, p.2), in a systematic review of the literature, defined peer mentoring as the regular and consistent interaction between peers where they engage in shared learning and support. As with expert mentorship described above, it can be on a group or individual basis and can include faculty or not (see Lewenski, 2017). It can also complement dyad mentorship between junior and senior academics (See Porat-Dahlerbruch, 2021). By way of example, Porat-Dahlerbruch (2021) describes a programme whereby a senior student was paired with a first-year doctoral student as a useful middle-ground approach to mentorship that resulted in high participation and positive feedback from students. They attribute this to the less hierarchical nature of peer mentoring, which allows PhD students to have a safe environment to ask questions and get advice while still benefiting from the experience of more senior peers.

Finally, reverse mentorship has been proposed in some contexts as a way to transform the higher education sector. For some, reverse mentoring requires a more equitable exchange between senior and junior staff/students to ensure that both can learn from each other's perspectives (O'Connor et al, 2024). There is a clear expectation in the mentorship agreement that each will learn equally from the other, often with the junior colleague taking the lead in the mentoring relationship (Cain et al, 2024). For Cain, et al (2024) this is particularly useful in contexts where there are significant cultural and social differences among senior and junior colleagues. For O'Connor et al (2024) this can lead to early career researchers experiencing the university as less alienating and frustrating as they come to understand how it functions. Equally, it can ensure that senior staff do not lose touch with the challenges, needs and experiences of early career researchers (O'Connor et al 2024). Furthermore, whilst senior staff may have greater expertise in the norms of academia, early career researchers may be more experienced with technology and new ways of working and reverse mentoring values these different knowledge sets equally. Similarly, existing literature notes the challenges contemporary higher education institutions face in retaining 'millennials' in the workforce (Brown, 2021). Reverse mentoring has been proposed to better understand their workplace experiences and expectations (Israni, 2022). Thus, this literature addresses, often only implicitly, the need for higher education institutions to create cultures of equity and inclusion through mentoring. This makes this literature of particular interest in the South African context, given the historical and continuing race and gender inequalities in higher education.

1.4 Does Mentorship Work? For Whom and for What?

One of the primary motivations for mentorship has been to reduce the non-completion rates of students due to the personal, institutional and academic factors that hinder their progress. In an integrative review of mentorship literature, Mollica (2014) showed that the majority of literature on mentorship focused on improved doctoral success, which was defined as timeous throughput and reduced non-completion. They suggest that achieving this improved throughput depends on being able to document the qualities of a good mentor and matching mentors with mentees (Mollica, 2014). Overall, however, evaluation methods have been partial and have focused extensively on student perceptions over objective measures, which are arguably only one part of evaluating a mentorship programme. In spite of this, Lorenzetti (2019) notes that students do report improved learning, increased socialisation and resilience, increased knowledge of academic norms, improved research skills, increased publications, improved graduation rates, more confidence and less stress, less isolation and improved career competence (see also Fam and Lee, 2019). Spelter-Roth (2011) showed that, based on student perceptions, mentoring increases students' social capital, improves their professional networks, increases productivity and increases their chances of entry into academic careers. For Lorenzetti (2019), mentorship addresses the feelings of loneliness and isolation that are common in PhD programmes. It assists with the development of soft skills such as academic writing, time management, confidence and self-discipline (see also Leao et al, 2015; Mazerrole, 2015). Similarly, Lii (2019) found that having a mentor reduced symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder and improved overall health of doctoral candidates.

In contrast, they also found that students struggling with anxiety and depression tended to meet their supervisors less often, publish less, and struggle with work-life balance, suggesting that mentorship might improve this situation. A study by Lunsford (2012) showed that mentorship was related to increased student satisfaction, scholarly outputs, student research interest, and faster completion times. However, this depended on the type of mentorship they received and the impact being measured. For example, although psychosocial and career mentoring both had an overall small but positive effect on these indicators, psychosocial mentoring improved student satisfaction, whilst career mentoring increased publications and conference presentations. Notably, psychosocial mentoring without career mentoring was, in fact, associated with lower publication rates. Thus Lunsford (2012) questions whether both psychosocial support and career support are necessary. For example, they argue that a mentor/supervisor may not provide much psychosocial support and may not be particularly kind or encouraging of a student, yet the student may

experience far higher career progression than another student with high psychosocial support and low career development support. In spite of this, their study did show that those with more supportive and mentoring supervisors did have earlier completion rates than those without suggesting that both could play a role. This study is a reminder of the importance of identifying the intended outcomes of mentorship prior to developing a programme of intervention. This is particularly important given the somewhat contradictory existing evidence about the impact of mentoring.

Given the complexity of determining what good mentorship is, there has been a growing literature on 'fit' and how one might match a mentor to a doctoral candidate for the best outcomes. Mazerrole (2015) argues that for effective mentorship, the relationship should be supportive, involve opportunities for developing professional skills, and involve a mutual investment in the mentoring relationship. Baker (2014) considered 3 kinds of identities that shape the fit between a mentor and a mentee. The first is professional identity, which relates to having a shared or complementary research agenda, shared methodological approaches, similar career goals etc. The second is relational identity, which involves the ability of mentors to relate to the student's life experience, including their values, approach to work-life balance, definition of success and working styles. The third area is personal identity, which refers to the race, gender, class and ethnic identity of the mentor and mentee. They propose a model for assessing 'fit' that they call M-P fit. This model differs from much of the literature on 'fit' because it goes beyond personality characteristics or personal identity to assess all aspects of the mentor/mentee relationship. They recommend doing M-P fit assessments before establishing mentoring relationships.

Importantly for the South African context, existing literature has focused on using mentorship to support underrepresented groups in academia or people at risk of non-completion because of their socio-economic disadvantages. Spalter-Roth (2011) compared the impact of two PhD mentorship programmes designed to address the lack of minority groups in academia by providing academic socialisation and mentorship in PhD programmes. Perhaps surprisingly, they found that having a white male mentor increased minority students' employment rates at a research university, their publications in top-tier journals, and their chances of attracting funding. One positive outcome was that they found minority students tended to have research topics focused on the experiences of minority groups or on matters of race and gender transformation, thus diversifying the discipline (in this case, Sociology). Similarly, Himler (2007), in a study of 1900 economics students who were matched with a mentor, argued that, although existing research suggests that women tend to do better in terms of research productivity and career development when matched with a male mentor than a female one, their research contradicted this and showed women who have male advisors publish less than those who have female advisors. This somewhat contradictory literature suggests a need to unpack the value and purpose of matching or 'fit' in mentorship programmes to understand its impact better.

1.5 The Downside to Mentoring

At its heart, there is a focus within the mentorship literature on students and early career academics who are at risk because of hostile or unaccommodating institutional cultures, family obligations and other factors that can lead to non-completion and slow progress. In the context of the overwhelmingly positive literature on mentoring, very little literature has raised critical questions about the potential problems of mentoring. For example, Reddick (2015) used the concept of 'troll modelling' to explore the darker side of mentorship. Troll modelling refers to instances where a mentor socialises their mentees into unethical, yet not uncommon, academic practices. These include reproducing hostile, individualistic cultures and avoiding administrative and other non-promotable work. I would add to this providing weak and limited supervision to students and avoiding undergraduate teaching in contexts where this is not well rewarded.

The very limited literature that recognises these kinds of problems with mentorship suggests a need for more critical reflection on the purpose and nature of mentorship. Similarly, very few articles reference the need to use mentorship to transform the academy, although some of the literature on 'fit' makes passing reference to this. One notable exception is the work by Preston (2014), which considers how mentorship can be mobilised for transformational learning. This might include increased self-reflection, creating space for academics to explore new roles that traditional academic hierarchies might exclude them from, exploring new perspectives or ideas not common within a discipline etc. They suggest that this approach can lead to less self-doubt and anxiety among younger scholars. However, for them, the need for transformational mentorship stems from challenges such as exclusionary institutional practices, increasing student numbers, increasing managerialism and more demands on faculty from students. In the next section, I consider how the need for transformational mentorship might be amplified in South Africa and, indeed, other contexts emerging from histories of legislated racism and sexism.

2. The South African Context

With a few exceptions (such as Dietz et al. 2006), the literature on mentorship is overwhelmingly from an Anglo-US context. The history of apartheid in South Africa has meant that there are several contextual challenges, inequalities and colonial legacies that impact on what kind of mentorship might be useful in this context. The first is that South Africa has historically produced very few PhD degrees relative to the global north. According to Mouton (2016), South Africa was, in 2006 near the bottom of all PhD producing countries. However, since the end of apartheid, there has been a significant effort to increase the number of PhD holders. This has largely been successful. In 2012 South Africa produced only 36 PhD graduates per million population, but by 2022, South Africa had produced 61 PhD graduates per million population. Whilst this is still low, it reflects a significant increase in PhD numbers (https://lmi-research.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/WEB-DPRU-FACTSHEET-7-7-4b-Doctoral_Graduates-2024.pdf).

However, these increases in PhD numbers have come with challenges. As early as 2006, Dietz et al. (2006) lamented the lack of quality PhD training in South Africa. Indeed, others have noted that PhD supervision is not always of high quality, and students can often be underprepared for PhD studies (Cloete et al., 2015). Herman and Sehoole (2018) note the systemic problems that have impacted on South African PhDs, including the uncontrolled growth of PhD numbers, which has often been driven by the funding associated with government subsidies for PhD graduates rather than a genuine need for more PhD graduates (see also Mouton et al., 2025). This can result in weaker candidates being accepted and supervisors carrying large supervision loads with little supervision experience. Dietz et al. (2006) also expressed concern that there is a history in some South African universities of weak examination methods whereby examiners are drawn from a small pool and do not necessarily evaluate to a high standard. Furthermore, South African PhD students take an average of 5.10 years to complete (Van Lill, 2024). Whilst this is comparable with other parts of the world, the South African PhD does not include mandatory coursework, which makes this a slow progression rate. Non-completion is also an often-documented concern (Van Lil, 2024).

The South African context also faces vast inequalities in education, which begin in school. According to the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 81% of South African grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning (https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pirls/). However, a minority of students obtain high-quality school education in South Africa, and these inequalities continue to the PhD level. Thus, the South African higher education sector requires significant transformation after the end of apartheid, which raises questions about what forms mentorship should take to avoid it simply reproducing the existing racially skewed system. Clearly, socialising students into an existing, unequal institution is not desirable. Indeed, all the mentorship programmes I have participated in below had transformation as a key aim, even if this was not always elaborated in detail. Based on 2012 data, Mouton (2016) notes that although there has been a growth in Black African PhD candidates, this is primarily due to an increased number of mostly male students from other parts of Africa since the end of apartheid (Mouton 2016). This suggests that transformation in the South African academy has been slow and resistant to change. Whilst the details of this are beyond the scope of this article, it is important that mentorship has been put forward as a key transformation intervention in South Africa and globally and this requires a deeper contextually rooted understanding of both transformation and mentorship.

Munene (2019), writing in the Ugandan context, is one of the only authors to recognise, albeit only briefly, the toxic culture of many universities and how mentorship might mediate against this. Munene (2019) reflects on a group-based, donor-funded mentorship programme. Whilst the programme resulted in high completion rates and publications, albeit from a very small cohort, they note a worrying phenomenon whereby weak supervisors can, in fact, feel threatened by their students. As a result, they may try to keep strong students to themselves throughout their postgraduate studies even if this is not in the student's best interests. They can thus limit their networks and opportunities and prevent them from advancing too far. Similarly, Dietz et al. (2006) argue that there is a risk of mentorship programmes institutionalising practices of favouritism and nepotism whereby networks associated with being part of a mentorship programme are often determined by supervisors and carry a risk of corrupt or unethical recruitment of students. I explore these and other risks in more detail below.

A key challenge is that the knowledge base on mentorship outside the global north is very limited. In spite of this, the expectations are that mentorship will deliver a vast number of benefits and address many social problems, such as economic hardship, inequality and exclusion, transformation and even dysfunctional institutions. Given these expectations, I outline what I feel are some of the challenges and contextual factors of mentorship that need to be recognised and identify knowledge gaps that can guide a future research agenda on the topic.

3. Autoethnography as Method: Experience as Cultural Knowledge

This paper draws on my experience over the past 18 years of working on PhD programme development. It draws on the principles of autoethnography as I aim to "describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 273). As such, I recognise my role in constructing knowledge through my own subject position and the choices I make. These include moments where I condense years of work into a singular coherent narrative in ways that may overshadow the complexity of the issues at hand. It also includes moments of deeper reflection on aspects of my existing knowledge that resonate with my subject positions. However, I also work from the recognition that every individual experience is embedded in a socio-cultural context that shapes and is, in turn, shaped by the meanings we attribute to this experience (Wall, 2008). We live storied lives (Squire, 2020). Autoethnography offers a unique opportunity to recognise the value of such storied experience and centre the seemingly unscientific notions of emotionality, investment and partial knowledge, thus valuing alternative ways of knowing beyond the social science canon (Wall, Hickey and Austin, 2011). In this way, my role as participant observer draws from thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that can be analysed and interpreted. As such, this method allowed me to reflect systematically on the work that I have been doing extensively for many years, thus stimulating a research agenda rooted in my subjective yet inevitably socially shared understanding of mentorship for South African PhD programmes.

Some of the work that I draw from has been explicitly defined as mentorship, whilst other work has involved establishing the academic and career development programme of a PhD, implementing a new PhD programme (thus including both academic and career development components) and mentoring early career academic many of whom are working on PhDs. The specific roles I have held, which I base the reflections in this paper on, are as follows:

(1) Developing one PhD programme from its inception at a South African University. This involved developing a recruitment strategy and process, creating an academic programme, selecting students, dealing with students' complaints and concerns and monitoring their progress.

(2) 5 large grants that had PhD students embedded in them and had an explicit mentorship and training component. Although I have held other grants that included PhD training, the 5 that I draw on for this paper had the training and mentorship of PhD students as one of the outcomes of the grant. Overall, 12 PhD students participated in these grants.

(3) Providing training to a cross-university PhD training programme that focused on research and professional development skills. This included more tangential work with approximately 20 students.

(4) 2 programmes that had a formal mentorship role. One involved explicitly mentoring PhD students from different urban-based South African universities. The other was designed to support early career academics who were completing PhDs. In these programmes, I provided individual mentoring to approximately 45 PhD students.

(5) Coordinating a PhD programme at a South African academic institution.

Notably, peer mentorship and reverse mentorship have not been a part of these progammes, and this is, therefore, a topic that others will be able to elaborate in more detail than I can. However, informal peer mentorship groups were developed as part of one of the programmes I have worked on. Throughout these experiences, I have collected various documents that have helped me develop this paper. These include programme evaluations, meeting minutes, informal notes from strategic planning sessions and, in some cases, student reflections from exit interviews.

My reflections in this paper draw on these experiences to suggest topics for clearer PhD mentoring, including the possible problems it can address (and those that it probably cannot), the conceptualisation of mentorship, its evaluation and the possible opportunities and pitfalls it can offer in South African higher education. These reflections are not necessarily because I consider myself an expert on PhD mentorship. Indeed, it is precisely because of moments where the mentorship I have offered has not felt like it worked particularly well that I thought it was necessary to take forward a broader conversation on mentorship within South African higher education.

4. Reflections on Mentorship in PhD Programmes: Challenges and Opportunities

In this section, I reflect on the lessons learned from the mentorship programmes described above and suggest ways forward for a research and intervention agenda to support South African PhDs. The reflections can be broadly grouped into five main themes. These are far from complete but are intended to stimulate discussions about other debates regarding PhD mentorship. The first theme is the management of the mentorship programme and how this shapes the programme's form, structure and priorities. The second is the mainstreaming of mentorship into the broader PhD programme. The third is the relationship between transformation and mentorship. The fourth is the relationship between supervision and mentorship, and the final theme is the risks and opportunities presented by mentorship in South African PhD programmes. Based on these themes, I conclude with recommendations for future research into PhD mentorship that can help guide future work in the area.

4.1 The Management of the Mentorship Programme: What Kind of Mentorship and Why?

One of the factors that has most clearly shaped the mentorship I have undertaken has been who initiates the mentorship. In several instances, mentorship programmes that I have experienced were created by the management of a university or through an external funding partner, which is then managed by the university administration, such as a faculty or research office. In these programmes, the interventions have tended to rely on a traditional mentoring model pairing a junior mentee with a senior mentor rooted in an implicit assumption that those who have succeeded in academia will show others how to succeed. I have found that where this is the case, these programmes tend to take a functionalist approach to mentorship and implement it in order to address an institutionally identified problem. Typically, they are designed to address slow PhD throughput, non-completion or low graduate numbers (Van Lil, 2024). Some of these also focus on transforming the academy, particularly by producing more black South African PhD holders (Mouton, 2016). Overall, these programmes were measured in terms of their quantitative outputs, such as graduate numbers and time to completion. These are critical objectives but, considering the literature above, do not address the full definition of mentorship. In particular, they exclude aspects such as improving the experience for doctoral candidates, providing psychosocial support and career guidance. However, it is often assumed that mentorship will also achieve this even if it is not measured.

The advantage of these programmes is that they are often able to leverage significant funding, given that they are implemented by those who control large budgets. However, one risk in these mentorship programmes is that they tend to focus on throughput without much insight into the theory of change that is expected to produce this throughput (see Kurian, 2023 for such an example). Most significantly, the softer potential benefits of mentorship, such as creating less alienating work cultures and supporting early career academics in their career decisions, are seldom recorded. This is not to say that these aspects of mentorship are not valued in the programme descriptions and in the discourses of university leaders, but often, it is assumed that they will just happen because mentorship is in place. In one of the more extreme examples I have experienced, there has been no guidance regarding activities or explicit expectations, simply the act of naming a mentor and leaving the mentor and mentee to decide what mentorship is. Of course, organically developed and mutually defined mentorship models could be very positive, but this approach makes it impossible to assess the impact of mentorship (Bynum, 2015). Thus, these interventions are strong at creating financial and logistical structures for mentorship but weak at articulating what mentorship is and how it might function to achieve the progamme goals.

A further unanticipated risk is that without the psychosocial aspect of mentorship articulated above and given the context of inequality that characterises South African academia, it is possible that such a programme inadvertently increases the pressure on students as they are seen as privileged to have funding and mentorship. Many South African studies have shown the extent of the stress that students face (see Bantjes, 2016). In cases where the focus is on indicators such as throughput, graduation and publication, without the psychosocial aspects of mentorship described in the literature, mentorship can be experienced by students as another layer of hierarchical monitoring that increases their anxiety and exacerbates feelings of alienation and inadequacy. Indeed, managerialism, which focuses on standardised performance outcomes aimed to meet increasingly business-oriented benchmarks, has been associated with high stress levels in higher education (see Zelnick, 2022; Deem, 1998). This runs counter to the literature described above, whereby a key component of successful mentoring involves friendship, reducing hierarchies and developing less lonely contexts in which early career academics can work. In contexts of extreme inequality, such as South Africa, having resources such as funding for studies, access to conferences, a supportive mentor, etc, puts some students in a position of privilege relative to others, creating extremely high expectations for performance. In instances where students receive these resources, and the academic and management culture is

hierarchical and punitive, mentors need to be particularly careful that they do not take on a policing role and become yet another person who tracks and monitors students rather than supporting them.

4.2 Mainstreaming Mentorship or Special Projects

As the above discussion suggests, mentorship in South Africa has often been an intervention offered to a select group of PhD students rather than something mainstreamed across PhD programmes. Similarly, several of the mentorship programmes in South African universities are externally funded (e.g. by research funders or local or international donors). In many instances, students need to apply to be part of the programmes. Firstly, this can mean that the programme is not sustained in the long term. However, even in the short term, it can create a sense of inequality where mentorship is only for a selected few. This poses a clear risk in South Africa because there have been several accusations of nepotism in selection processes at some South African universities (Jansen, 2023). Poorly managed, this mentorship model can exacerbate a culture of inequality and thus, inadvertently, run counter to the ethos of mentorship programmes to create a more ethical and inclusive organisational culture. Such programmes will always have to guard against this accusation regardless of whether it represents reality.

Furthermore, access to such mentorship interventions is often competitive, which can mean that the strongest students receive mentorship whilst the weaker students, often those who are marginalised in many ways and who arguably need mentorship the most, do not. Finally, where mentorship is externally funded rather than being mainstreamed into PhD training, the demand for success to ensure ongoing funding can prevent critical self-reflection and learning and reduce experimentation because the intention is to continue receiving funding rather than to experiment and learn from mistakes.

4.3 Mentorship for Transformation

In all the instances where I have participated in these mentorship programmes, one of their explicit intentions has been to promote transformation in academia. However, few I have been part of have considered how the nature of the mentorship impacts whether this indeed happens. Many focus on recruiting black South African candidates and matching them with black mentors, as documented in the literature. This strategy has been used in many of the programmes I have been part of. This is an essential first step, but the existing literature suggests that meaningful transformation is likely if we pay attention to the format of the mentoring and encourage peer and reverse mentoring in particular. The conflicting literature on matching in the mentorship relationship and the extent of the need for transformation within South African academia suggests that more research is needed to provide context-relevant articulations of the relationship between mentorship and transformation. Whilst there is a lack of clear data, a review of complaints I have handled over the years does not necessarily show that race and gender matching is sufficient for students to have a good PhD mentorship experience. However, this is a topic that has not been researched sufficiently. What is clear is that the transformation of academic faculty is only a first step and cannot itself reduce the risks of negative institutional practices such as ‘troll modelling’ described above. Below, I consider in more detail how the nature of supervision in South Africa could impact on mentorship, given how closely aligned they are.

4.4 The Relationship between Supervision and Mentorship

One area of concern that I have experienced in PhD mentorship is that, in some cases, mentorship is put in place to deal with weaknesses in the supervision process and practices. In these cases, the mentorship often involves providing core training in methodology and research that should ideally be part of postgraduate training already. Similarly, it is often intended to give feedback to students on their PhD research who might experience weak or absent supervisors. The most common complaint I have experienced as a coordinator and developer of PhD programmes has been of absent supervisors taking several months to respond to students. This is often countered by supervisors' claims that students lack the skills needed for PhD level study and, therefore, require large amounts of time in a context where workloads are very high (see Roets et al., 2017). Regardless, the structure of some of the mentorship programmes assumes that students do not get or have the necessary training within their institutions to conduct independent research. In these cases, mentorship can risk becoming a band-aid that covers the weaknesses of PhD programmes rather than meeting the definitions described above of career development and psychosocial support. In South Africa, the only requirement for supervision is that the supervisor must have a PhD, and there is, therefore, extreme variability in the practices and abilities of different supervisors.

Indeed, one of the most striking things I have experienced as a mentor is how varied supervision practices are. Whilst there is no doubt that supervisors are doing some of the mentorship activities described in the literature above, this is almost entirely based on the supervisor's discretion, with some providing only a bare minimum of project supervision and others providing extensive and far-reaching support. Some supervisors are research-active, with students involved in their research, but many are not. As a result, the extent to which students have access to mentorship from their supervisors is unequal and may vary throughout the PhD period depending on the supervisor's time constraints. As documented in the literature, it is possible that, with increasing supervision loads, mentorship within supervision may decrease. In some universities, the contracts and agreements that students and supervisors sign limit demands on supervisors and set clear boundaries about what supervisors can and cannot be expected to provide. This is a practical response to increasing workloads and possibly slow or weak academic progress, but it highlights the importance of making intentional decisions about the role of mentorship in supervision.

4.5 Possible Risks of Mentorship Programmes

Although the literature on mentorship contains very few critical reflections, some forms of mentorship can be destructive. In my experience, the most significant risk is that extractive practices that are disguised in the language of mentorship can develop. In some contexts, supervisors do not have their own research underway. In these cases, the supervisor's publications may be entirely (or mostly) based on their student's work. This is very different from instances where the supervisor has a research project in which students participate or where a student conceptualises and publishes their own work independently. Instead, students work almost entirely independently but with the expectation that all their publications will include the supervisor's name, even if they do not contribute to writing the publication. In these contexts, I would argue that it is an exploitative practice as, far from integrating students into the supervisor's project from which the student can learn and far from teaching them how to publish their work, supervisors advance their careers almost entirely by adding their names to student's publications. This also deprives students of single-authored publications that are needed for career progress in some disciplines. But more importantly it means that supervisors are often not very experienced researchers themselves and rely on their students for both data and outputs. This is not unlike the well-documented critique whereby academics in the global South act as fieldworkers for those in the global north, with the less powerful party (the global south) producing data and the more powerful party (the global north) publishing from it (see Ababneh, 2024). In South Africa, the fact that publication is linked to subsidy where the supervisor may receive monetary compensation or promotion for publication, the temptation to add one's name to all student publications is high – even when this disadvantages the student. The idea of mentoring students to publish their work can, in these instances, be a cover for this exploitative practice. Thus, without due attention to the quality of PhD programmes and supervision practices, there are risks associated with the rhetoric of mentorship. In the worst scenarios, it can reproduce exploitation, abuses of power associated with hierarchical institutions, and troll modelling. Furthermore, the idea of mentorship as a special project described above can reproduce a celebrity culture (see Walsh et al, 2021) that has been identified in research as a risk factor for bullying, sexual harassment and corruption. Whilst the links are by no means inevitable or straightforward, in a context where there are fairly few PhD holders, the risk of creating a celebrity culture needs to be better understood as a possible spinoff from mentorship programmes that focus on producing elite students.

5. Recommendations and Some Ways Forward

At the heart of the critical reflections above is the realisation that we lack sufficient information to adequately design and monitor PhD mentorship. There have been a number of carefully designed high-quality mentorship programmes in South Africa and identifying and documenting good practices from them would be an important first step. In addition, there is a great need for monitoring and evaluating of mentoring programmes that goes beyond measuring throughput, time to completion and mentorship activities and instead investigates the impact on career development and psychosocial support as two key aspects of quality mentorship. Ideally these evaluations should be long term and sufficiently large to capture the impact of mentoring on career development and academic transformation over time. This would complement the existing literature which is predominantly qualitative and reflexive. To mentor well, it is also necessary to better understand the problems that PhD students face. Much attention is placed on the economic struggles of students (see Mouton, 2016), but there are likely other challenges as well, such as a lack of confidence, a sense of alienation, toxic competitiveness, etc (see, for example, Khonou, 2019). Understanding these and understanding which students struggle with which barriers is an essential first step in creating effective mentorship programmes.

In particular, understanding the effect of mentorship programmes on transformation and unpacking which approaches to mentorship might result in which kinds of transformation is key to a more nuanced and effective approach to transforming the academy. This is likely to include experimenting with models of reverse and peer mentoring to assess their ability to undermine the more toxic forms of supervision and mentorship that do, at times, take place. This requires a clear articulation of what transformation is and what role mentorship can play in it. It also requires a willingness to try models of mentorship that may fail and to critically self-reflect on what works and what does not in what contexts.

Donor and management-led mentorship programmes create complex situations where there is a risk of creating a group of relatively privileged students. Whilst this is not an inevitable outcome, it is a risk. Finding cost-effective ways to mainstream mentorship into the everyday PhD activities of a department may go a long way towards reducing inequality in South African academia and ensuring the most vulnerable students get the support they need to succeed.

Given the relationship between supervision and mentorship, there is a need to focus on creating high-quality supervision practices and ensuring equitable minimum standards for supervision. Furthermore, better understanding and creating mentorship models that support supervisors (rather than duplicating supervision) may well address the problems of poor-quality PhD programs identified in the South African literature. Research into current mentorship practices within supervision can ensure that extractive practices are minimised and that some supervisors do not become completely overburdened by mentorship.

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