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Academic Mentoring Nature-Nurture Cycle: Some Insights from Own Experience

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A G D I Working Paper

WP/23/034

Academic Mentoring Nature-Nurture Cycle: Some Insights from Own Experience

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Academic Mentoring Nature-Nurture Cycle: Some Insights from Own Experience**Evans Osabuohien & Alhassan A-W Karakara****Abstract**

In this little article, we discuss our experience and relationship as a mentor (Evans Osabuohien) and mentee (Alhassan Karakara) and useful insights gained over the mentorship period of five years. This becomes essential following various discussions we have had at different academic for a notably conferences, seminars, and workshops. The discourse is mainly focused on the areas of conducting research, scholarly publication, and administering research grants. We underscore three points to help mentors and mentees to establish a good working relationship in the mentoring process drawing from our experience as social scientists, which would also be applicable in other disciplines.

Keywords: Academic research mentoring, Academic publication mentoring, Research grant mentoring.

Introduction

Mentoring has been identified as a key mechanism to assist early career academics to achieve career progression. Mentor – mentee relationship has become essential to career development. Meggeinson and Clutterbuck (1995) offered a definition of mentoring to be ‘off-line advice from one person to another to assist the recipient in making significant advances in their personal, professional or career development’. Also, Haggard et al. (2011) define mentoring as a one-to-one reciprocal relationship between a more experienced and knowledgeable faculty member (the mentor) and a less experienced one (the protégé). The relationship is characterized by regular and consistent interaction over a period of time to facilitate protégé development. However, mentoring is different from a supervisor in charge of someone’s thesis or project and an appraiser in a faculty job functioning. Mentoring enables the mentee to speak more freely than they might with a research supervisor. One of a mentor’s most important jobs is to help the mentees determine the kind of career they wish to

pursue (Pololi *et al.*, 2002; Rose *et al.*, 2005). A mentee freely discusses career progressions, vision, and direction of moving from being a novice to an expert in the chosen field. Detsky and Baerlocher (2007) gave a snapshot of mentoring by asking what really interests you the mentee. What jobs are fun for you the mentee? Allow the mentor-mentee relationship to design the mentee position around those activities.

Over the years, mentoring was more traditional where the mentor gives to the mentee what he/she (mentor) deems fit for the mentee. However, in modern forms of mentoring (developmental mentoring), the emphasis is on mentees finding their own solutions to the challenges of career advancement rather than straight advice giving or ‘gifting’ of opportunities that are common in patronage. This form of support is more effective in the long term because mentees are equipped with new problem-solving skills, unlike patronage which offers “a hand up” for the duration of the relationship but does not foster self-sufficiency.

Academic mentoring cuts across various themes such as Teaching portfolio; Research portfolio; Publications 'pipeline'; Editorial Experience and Targeting External funding. Mentoring young faculty members and early career scholars are high on the agenda in most universities in Europe and America. However, not much can be said in many developing countries, which might be related to their low level of motivation and reward system. In this piece, we describe some useful points for individuals who play the role of mentors and those who receive mentorship (i.e., mentees) in the field of economics and social science research. It is worth noting that a mentor is an individual who is not the student's direct academic, or research supervisor. Our mentor-mentee relationship concentrates on research and publication mentoring without the teaching aspect as well as other personal interactions (though important). Suggestions for a healthy mentoring relationship based on our experience as a case in point are provided.

Honesty and Integrity as Foundation

The nature of the relationship is that mentors and mentees should feel free to give honest expressions and advice without insistence from either side (Lee *et al.*, 2006). It is important that mentors do not promote their own personal interests unduly over those of their mentees who also have aspirations (Rose *et al.*, 2005).

As much as possible the mentee should be honest in discussions with the mentor. Honesty is the building block to success and achievement. In the early days of mentoring, the mentee should open up with the mentor about his/her strengths and weaknesses. Regarding a research activity, the mentor would usually ask for a concept note from the mentee to see the direction of an idea the mentee might be conceiving. It is up to the mentee to let the mentor know his/her research knacks (areas of interest, strength – whether quantitative incline or qualitative, and so on). This is essential as a proper and timely diagnosis is fundamental to the prescription of correct medication and treatment of an ailment.

In terms of honesty and integrity, it is encouraged that the mentee should openly tell the mentor about the workload. If the mentee cannot accomplish a specific task on time, he/she needs to discuss with the mentor what his/her challenges are, and knowledge limitations that could affect the agreed time. For instance, if a mentee who has never worked with panel data is given the task of carrying out panel data analysis, he/she should be honest in letting the mentor know, and appropriate help would be given to him/her (mentee). Being honest would make the mentor build trust in the mentee and this goes a long way toward building the achievement of the mentee whenever the mentor wants to recommend him/her for any research engagements. It is worth noting that the mentor-mentee relationship is more than co-authorship or research collaborations, it is a learning platform for the mentee to learn a great deal, though the mentor also learns from the mentee. The mentee should not be afraid to ask questions and seek clarifications even with regard to data modeling and writing a whole research paper. However, all discussions between mentor and mentee should remain at the discretion of both parties while being targeted toward improving their mentorship outcomes.

There should equally be honesty about the nature of the mentorship relationship from the onset. This is to ensure the distinction of the relationship from a friendship. Doing so may result in complications, hurt feelings, and can be destructive. This is not to say that the mentoring relationship cannot be cordial, personal, enjoyable, or fun. This simply means that the appropriate professional distance must be maintained to protect both parties (Ramani *et al.*, 2006).

Mentee as the Captain and Mentor as the Co-Pilot

The mentee is most often the driver and should be in the driver's seat (like the captain) while the mentor (like the co-pilot) directs the mentee to the predetermined destination. For the

mentee to drive the course of the mentoring relationship tantamount to his/her research interest, the mentor allows the mentee to think through and comes out with research ideas. Thus, original ideas or questions will ultimately be generated by mentees and mentors may increasingly play a more peripheral role (Detsky & Baerlocher 2007).

Evans Osabuohien (mentor) mentoring of Alhassan Karakara(mentee) was mostly on Karakara coming out with an idea and writing a concept note, from there the mentor jumps in and gives the needed directions cum suggestions. In our own case, the very first concept note written was on “household ICT access and bank patronage”. Going through the concept note we refined it and thinking through it, we observed that it can actually be divided into two different research scenarios, which we did and they were published (see Karakara & Osabuohien, 2019; 2022). The initial draft was presented by Alhassan Karakara as one paper at the 8th Annual Conference on Regional Integration in Africa (ACRIA 8), Lomé, Togo, in July 2017. Thus, in mentoring, the concept of reciprocity occurred frequently in the mentoring literature (Wilson et al., 2010; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007; Carey & Weissman, 2010). The mentor should not be ‘selfish’ to ‘use’ the mentee for his/her publishing and advancement ambition but should be geared towards mutual benefits.

Mentee taking charge means he/she has to be hardworking. In our own mentorship relationship, whenever a paper is virtually complete, the mentor directs the mentee to start thinking about the next idea or at times sends the call for papers and asks that he comes out with something to submit¹. Karakara has always been hardworking on this to at least draft something in response to calls for papers. Some of these responses to calls were selected for conference presentations and others were published. Hard work should be the hallmark of the mentee and he/she should not feel pressurised by the mentor. As said earlier, if the mentee cannot meet any task, he/she should be open and honest to seek clarification.

Frequent Evaluation and Progress Report

On a more formal note, some have suggested that mentoring relationships should undergo regular evaluations for a process (clear objectives and regular, purposeful meetings), communication (feedback, mentees being able to challenge mentors), and outcomes (sense of progress and development, improved networks) [Grainger, 2002].

¹In essence, we have come to realise that any research paper done properly should lead to further ideas for developing another research, which usually stems from suggestion for further studies.

In our engagements with Karakara as a mentee, we had regular evaluations of the mentorship. This enabled us to know whether our efforts are yielding anticipated results and for the mentee to also know whether the directions that were given are right helpful or whether there is a need for adjustment. Our evaluations were on: how many papers have we completed within a certain timeframe? how many of them have we sent for conference presentations? which ones have been published? which ones are under review? among others. We did these evaluations every six months and set targets for the next six months.

The evaluations enable us to communicate freely, measure our outcomes, ironout outstanding issues, get feedback from each other, and see whether we are progressing effectively. As of the time of writing this article, our mentorship engagement has enabled us to publish together a total of 12 peer-reviewed research articles, four chapters in edited books, two articles currently under review in journals, executed three externally funded research grants with others and Karakara (the mentee) has attended seven different conferences across different countries (See the List in the Appendix).

What is more important to note is that the mentorship process was sparked off by Africa Finance and Economic Association (AFEA) mentorship program where Prof Evans Osabuohien was the Director. As of 2022, Karakara has grown rapidly and he presently serves as one of the Directors of AFEA in the capacity of Vice-Chair of the AFEA's Elections Committee. Some of the conferences Karakara attended include the Conference on Land Policy in Africa (CLPA), Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire (November 2019); the International Conference on Sustainable Development in Africa (ICSDA) at Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria (June 2019); Africa Innovation Summit II, Kigali, Rwanda (June 2018); Workshop on Research Methodology and Scholarly Writing, organized by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Harare, Zimbabwe (February 2018), among others.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to discuss our experiences regarding our engagement in research mentor-mentee activities. We underscore three points to help mentors and mentees to establish good working relationships in the mentoring process drawing from our experience as social scientists, which could also be applicable in other disciplines. These three points

include honesty and integrity; the mentee act as captain and mentor a co-pilot; and frequent evaluations and progress report.

To further give an insight into our discussion and summarise our ideas, Figure 1 captures a schema on the three points. In the figure, we indicated that these three are all important issues and are mutually inclusive and reinforcing to one another in affecting the success of a mentorship process. Thus, mentors and mentees can boost their mentorship success by following these articulated points, though the points are not exhaustive.

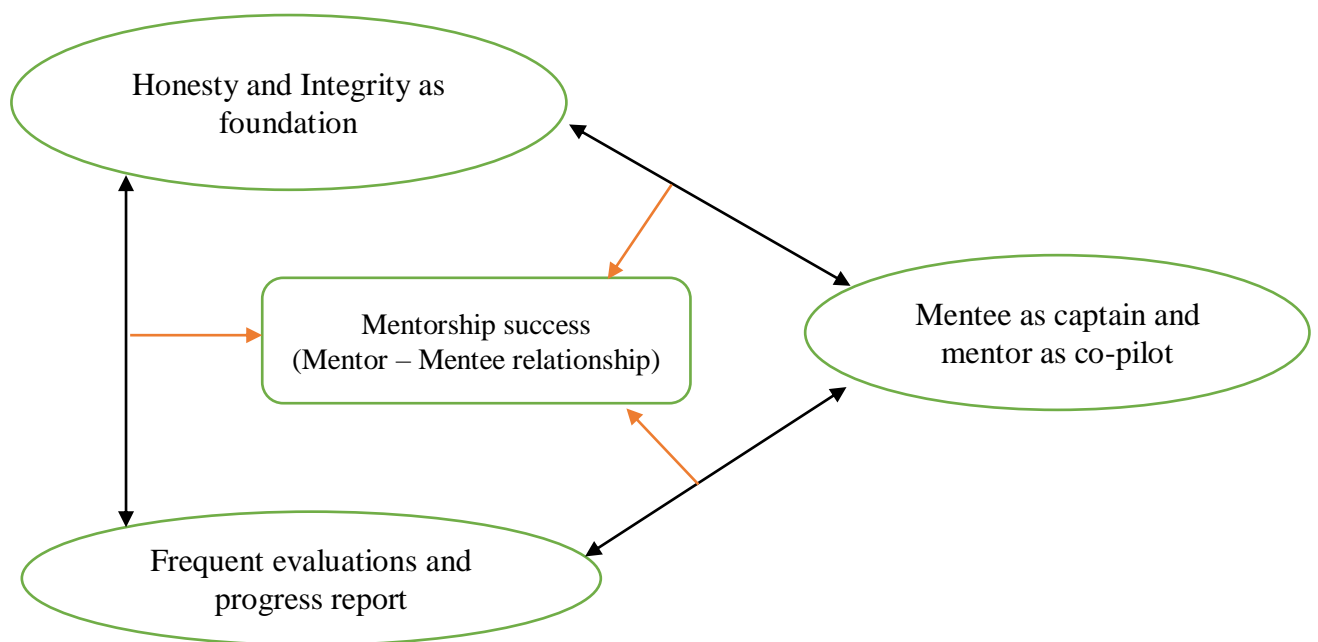


Figure 1: Mentor-mentee success
Source: The Authors'

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Appendix

Journal Articles published

1. Karakara, A. A. and Osabuohien, E. S. (2022). Threshold Effects of ICT Access and Usage in Burkinabe and Ghanaian Households. *Journal of Information Technology for Development*, 28 (3), 511 – 531. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2021.1971148>
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4. Karakara, A. A., Efobi, U., Olokoyo, F., Beecroft, I., and Osabuohien, E. S. (2021). Youth Employment and Large-scale Agricultural Land Investments Nexus in Africa: Mixed Method Insights from Nigeria. *Africa Development*, XLVI (4), 177 – 203.
5. Karakara, A. A., Osabuohien, E.S., Nwachukwu, J.C. and Osabohien, R. (2021). Innovations in Women Savings Behaviour and Agricultural Business support: The Ghanaian 'Money-Box' Model. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 25 (5s), 146 – 157. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.29063/ajrh2021/v25i5s.14>.
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Chapters Published in Edited Books

13. Karakara, A. A. & Osabuohien, E. S. (2020). The Role of Institutions in the Discourse of Sustainable Development in West African Countries. In Osabuohien, E.S., Oduntan, E.A., Gershon, O., Onanuga, O. & Ola-David, O. (eds) *"Handbook of Research on Institution Development for Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Growth in Africa"* (pp. 15 – 27) IGI Global DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-4817-2.ch002>
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Articles currently under review

Land tenure, Agricultural risks and smallholder farmers’ coping strategies: Evidence from Nigeria and Cote D’Ivoire. Paper under review in *Journal of International Development*.

A threshold effect analysis of households’ ability to maintain economic welfare: Rural-urban dichotomy in Ghana. Paper under review in *Journal of Poverty and Public Policy*

Funded Research Grants and Awards

- i. AERC research grant on GVC Phase II 2023 project to carry out research on “Global Value Chain Participation and Firms in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria” 2023
- ii. Research Grant from the UNU-WIDER Project on Social Protection, Taxation and Crisis 2022, under the theme Domestic Resource Mobilisation. Supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), 2022.
- iii. Award on research project titled “Large-scale Land Acquisitions, Rural Change and Social Conflict” that was Funded by German Research Foundation (DFG) through two different grants. First, grant number RTG1666 (GlobalFood) and second project number 192626868 in the framework of the collaborative German-Indonesian research project CRC 990 (SFB): “EForTS – Ecological and Socioeconomic Functions of Tropical Lowland Rainforest Transformation System, 2019-2021.
- iv. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)’s 2017 Meaning-making Research Initiatives (MRI) Competition Award to carry out a research project on ‘Large-scale Land Investments and (Un)Employment Questions in Africa: Quantitative and Qualitative Insights from Nigeria’, 2018-2020.
- v. Overall Best Conference Paper Award, 1st International Conference on African Entrepreneurship and Innovation 2019, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, June 2019.
- vi. Best Track Session Paper Award on ‘Innovations in Women Savings Behaviour and Business Support: The ‘Money Box’ Model, 1st International Conference on African Entrepreneurship and Innovation 2019, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, June 2019.