Mentors’ Perceptions on the Post Mentoring Relationships in Academic Organizations

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Abstract This qualitative study aims to reveal the new period of the relationships between the mentors and mentees who continue to work in the same academic organization after the mentoring relationship terminates. The findings of this study that was conducted in a small group of mentors who cultivated multiple mentees show that the separation phase did not occur immediately although the relationship was formally terminated. The relationships were still maintained informally as the mentees expected to be promoted in the same organization. Mentees usually become more independent at the redefinition phase, whereas certain disagreements might lead to conflict of interest. However, peer relationship did not come to the forefront whereas it is expected to be built at this stage according to the literature. These results indicate that the characteristics of the separation and redefinition phases reported in the literature may not always apply as a standard to all mentor-mentee relationships. There is a need for further qualitative studies regarding the mentoring relationship that represents an important dimension of university culture. This will contribute to in-depth understanding of different mentor and mentee experiences and observations.

Keywords Mentoring Relationship, Academic Organizations, Mentors’ Perceptions, Qualitative Research, Turkey

1. Introduction

A mentoring relationship in an academic organization is different from that in the other organizations with respect to its duration as well as individual and organizational outputs. It can be considered a unique method to develop human resources [10]. Kalianov (1998) defines the mentoring relationship as a long-term special relationship that is based on a strong interaction, role-modelling and one-to-one learning process between a senior academic and her/his students who are at the beginning of their academic development. Mentoring process contributes to the academic and psychosocial development of the mentees and enables them to learn the professional codes. The research in this field points out that an efficient mentoring process will increase the self-confidence and motivation of the mentees. High levels of job and professional satisfaction, organizational commitment and high academic performance are the most commonly emphasized outcomes [22, 1, 8, 31]. Furthermore, a long-term mentoring relationship enables the socialization of the mentees to the university culture; and also promotes a positive perception about and positive attitude toward the academic climate and professional identity [21]. Similarly, Lechuga stated (2011) that the mentor is an agent of socialization and plays an important role in the disciplinary socialization of the students. Mentees carry the traces of such relationship throughout their academic careers [9].

Kram (1983) identified four basic stages of mentoring as initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition. The studies on mentoring focus more on the initiation and cultivation phases; therefore, the literature contains abundant evidence about the antecedents and consequences of these phases. However, it is difficult to suggest the same statement for the separation and redefinition phases. During the separation phase, the mentee’s need for and dependence on the mentor decreases; on the other hand, the relationship develops into a peer relationship or friendship during the redefinition phase as suggested by rather general and limited findings [16, 21]. However, it may not always be easy to rapidly create and maintain the peer relationship that complements the mentoring process for the parties who work in the same way. Therefore, the details regarding the experiences during the redefinition phase are important to understand the long-term implications of the mentoring relationships. For instance, the mentees who complete their doctoral studies in many universities in the world usually cannot continue their academic careers in the same universities; whereas, this is a different case in Turkey. Majority of the students in many public universities in Turkey also work as research assistants at the same universities during their doctoral studies. The academic units of these universities first select the faculty they need
amongst these research assistants who complete their doctoral studies. For this reason, many mentors and ex-mentees continue working in the same department of the universities in Turkey following the mentoring process and the post-mentoring relationships constitute a natural part of the university culture.

2. Method

Formal termination of a long-term relationship in an academic organization does not necessarily mean that the perceptions of the parties will also come to an end in terms of the cognitive and affective aspects of the relationship. For example, if a mentee who completes her/his doctoral study does not feel prepared to work independently, her/his need for the guidance of the mentor or expectation to be protected may continue for a while. Connell (2007) states that the separation phase is marked by mentee independence and autonomy, as well as turmoil, anxiety, and feelings of loss. On the other hand, the mentor may not acknowledge that the mentee has become independent quickly and may wish to intervene her/him explicitly or implicitly. Furthermore, the cultural codes of the meanings attributed to the master-apprentice relationships may affect the evolution of a vertical relationship into a horizontal form [29]. Therefore, the experiences of the parties who continue to work in the same organization during the redefinition phase may pose interesting questions for the mentoring research. The aim of this present research is to reveal how the parties maintain their relationships at the redefinition stage once the mentoring process is formally terminated, and explain what is experienced during this process based on the perceptions of the mentors.

2.1. Sample

Firstly, fifteen academics who worked at different units of a public university (Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, Faculties of Science, Agriculture, and Engineering); had multiple mentoring experiences and continued working in the same unit with the mentees they cultivated once the mentoring process was terminated were identified. At the next step, the sample was limited to a total of 8 mentors including 7 professors and 1 associate professor who could be reached and volunteered to participate in the study. It was assumed that the mentors could make comparisons as they took part in the cultivation of several mentees and had rich experience regarding the redefinition phase. All mentees who were described by the mentors in this study also worked as the research assistants of their mentors during their PhD studies.

2.2. Data Collection

A qualitative research design was used for in-depth understanding of the experiences regarding the mentoring process, while the data of the study was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were asked two questions:

- ‘How do you think you contributed to the development of the mentee during the mentoring process?’
- ‘How was your relationship maintained after the mentee(s) completed their doctoral studies and were appointed as the assistant professors in the same unit?’

Each interview with the mentors involved in this study took 45-50 minutes and all interviews except those of two mentors who did not give consent were recorded with an audio-recorder. The interview notes were then transcribed.

3. Findings

The transcript notes were analysed under two categories: mentoring process and post-mentoring process.

3.1. Mentoring process

The participants had similar perceptions regarding the basic contributions of the mentoring process to the mentees, and it was found that they emphasized the academic outcomes. They stated that the activities conducted jointly such as writing and presenting an article and paper; taking part in projects, improving foreign language skills, gaining experience in lecturing contributed more to the development of the mentees during the mentoring process except the thesis preparation. The participants did not much mentioned on psychological and social support. This finding is consistent with the findings of some studies. For instance, Buyukgoze-Kavas et al. (2010) indicated that Turkish students reported less socioeconomic support from their mentors and were less satisfied with their mentoring relationship. Moreover, they also emphasized the role-model function of the mentors as also underlined in the literature [27, 4]:

- We worked jointly for projects except the thesis preparation process.... They assisted my lectures
- We prepared a presentation for a conference jointly.. I took her/him to international project meetings ...s/he carried out multidisciplinary activities.. her/his greed decreased as her/his self-confidence increased and was further involved collaborations....
- The joint activities during the PhD process are not limited to the thesis; we cooperated in preparing many publications. The laboratory works are also performed by the mentee assistants .......Furthermore, we worked jointly with all of them in the projects
- Our PhD students were also project researchers ....they developed themselves not only in scientific aspects but also in social terms ...they gained experience in building relationships between the universities-firms ...
Mentoring is provided to those who demand it. ...I didn’t set the boundaries of the interaction, they were defined by the needs of the mentee ...........I’m not providing mentoring all the time but our relationship continues based on daily interactions and improves as it progresses.

- Mentees deliver the applied courses ....they occasionally attend the congresses in Turkey and abroad..

- Mentees are influenced by the lecturing style of the mentors, their interactions with the students, and their behaviours, sometimes this might be in the form of direct imitation, like a copy. ... They sometimes write the formulas on the board exactly with the same style of their mentors in the course...

- One mentee educates her/his students and takes care of the students exactly in the same way I do, but the other one does not do so. ....

3.2. Post-mentoring Process

This period was analysed in two sub-phases: Separation and redefinition

3.2.1. Separation Phase

This phase starts when the mentoring process is formally terminated and the mentee becomes more independent. Completing their doctoral studies, the mentees start working in new environments depending on the job opportunities, while the mentors are transferred to a new relationship [25].

In Turkey, though, especially the public universities meet their faculty needs primarily through internal resources; therefore, a candidate completing the PhD degree can apply for the assistant professor position in the same unit if the concerned department has any appropriate position. However, external candidates can also apply to these positions as the university announces them at national level. The prerequisite of the application for all candidates is to ensure the appointment and promotion criteria set by the university regarding the academic performance (scientific publication, scientific studies, teaching activities etc.). When it is necessary to select the internal and external candidates who meet the requirements, the ex-mentees whom the academic unit know better are usually preferred. The most important person who can provide reference for the ex-mentee during this decision-making phase is the his/her mentor. Mentor’s views about and support to the candidate are extremely critical during the appointment process. For that reason, the relationship between the parties after the mentoring process does not account for a classic type of separation; while the ex-mentee needs strong interest and support from the mentor for a while. In fact, the mentors who were included in this study expressed that their relationships with the ex-mentees still continued informally until they were appointed to the academic positions, and they did not go through a strong separation phase. At this stage, some of them continued their joint activities they had already commenced. Therefore, separation did not represent the actual loss of relationship with the mentor but it was a transitional period in which the mentees left the academic unit:

- Our relationship was not interrupted thanks to the mentee’s role in a project; it was maintained as it was previously......

- The mentees were researchers in a project thus their relationships were not interrupted....

- Three mentees did not have to wait too long after their PhD studies were finalized.., only one of them had to wait for 1 year but s/he had a dedicated room in the department ...

- We worked jointly during the field surveys in on-going projects at this phase ..... Although the mentors support their ex-mentees who want to continue their academic careers in the same unit, they don’t think that it is true practice, in principle, for a candidate who completes her/his doctoral process to continue her/his academic career in the same academic unit. The mentors think that those who continue their academic career in the same faculty become blunt in their personal development; on the other hand, the academic organizations that employ the internal resources all the time lose their dynamism:

- ....I don’t stand up for continuing the academic career in the same department..... I told my mentees that it would smooth their way and develop them further if they work in another university, but it wouldn’t be so good if they stay.. Professors cannot work in the same department with their students in the U.S...

- In my opinion, those who complete their PhD should not stay as a faculty in the same organization, they should prepare their files and apply to any university, which is a more objective approach ....,

- Those who complete their PhD should not work as lecturers in the same university.

- While we were cultivating our students, we wished that they could become future faculties in the same organization and were felt relaxed when they did so; however, it might be unfavourable if the organization continues for a long time to employ the faculties from the internal resources as it is perceived as if it was repeating itself...

- Students should be selected only according to the objective academic criteria without any discrimination after doctoral period regardless of whether the candidates are internal or external. The external candidates might have a high academic success but low adaptability ...

- No one should be appointed as a faculty to the department where s/he completed their PhD.. Those who complete their PhD should apply to the Council of Higher Education which should appoint them to the vacant positions at universities.. My former students were appointed to my department.. but this not right!....
3.2.2. Redefinition Phase:

Commonly referred to as collegiality period of the parties in the mentoring literature [11], this phase is the closure of the mentoring relationship. The mentors who were included in this study explained this phase based on their personal experience and observations regarding the other mentor-ex-mentee relationships. The redefinition phase was characterized by two main themes: emerging independence and conflict. The mentors stated that some mentees become more independent quickly at this new stage while the others remained dependent on the mentor for a while because of certain factors related to the mentors or mentees. The duration of the dependence was associated with the personal traits of the mentees and cultural codes. On the other hand, the interviewees explained different types of mentor-mentee relationships they observed. Particularly, they pointed out certain conflicts experienced between the mentors and mentees and among the mentees themselves. The themes, contents and verbatim relating to the redefinition phase are collectively presented in Table 1.

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<th>MAIN THEMES</th>
<th>VERBATIM</th>
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<td>...s/he became independent rapidly, but s/he still respected me; s/he didn’t let me down in her/his behaviours. Sometimes, we also performed joint academic studies .....</td>
<td>When the PhD was completed, she didn’t like being treated like an ex-mentee, she made independent publications and was involved in different research collaborations ...our joint activities were limited but she provided feedback frequently ...</td>
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<td>I told them that they had to become independent after they became assistant professors; I told them they had to be on their own then in designing individual projects, obtaining patents, making publications and as such ....I was with her/him in her/his first project presentation .... This experience increased her/his self-confidence to a great extent .....</td>
<td>If the students had a strong potential, they could in fact become independent faster and we wouldn’t have to feel urged to protect them all the time, we believe that they can do many thing on their own. But we have to provide further support to the students with an average potential at all stages... this prolongs the relationship and dependence ...... When the students stay in the same unit, they can be overshadowed by their professors for a long time and thus they cannot become independent.</td>
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<td>Students should become independent after their PhD and cut off their connections. Sometimes a mentee may act like a student when s/he is with her/his ex-mentor although s/he has become a professor or the student may be always under the protection of her/his professor. ..... Mentee’s character influences how s/he behaves after PhD... respect, fidelity, their expectations and their attitudes as mentors are all shaped by their characteristics ...</td>
<td>We want them first to break the dependence and then rebuild the relationship but one of my mentees had a longer dependence. .... She always tended to lave the leadership role to me, she had difficulty in breaking her dependence ...but another mentee was separated from me just during her PhD..... she is now totally independent</td>
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<td>One mentee wanted to continue her/his dependence longer, another one became independent quickly, s/he was more assertive; but we’re at the same department and use the same lab, we still run across each other... my attitude was very determinant in this process of developing independence, I think professor-student relationship also comes to an end as soon as the PhD is finalized ... I saw them as my peers not as my students after the mentoring process; our relationship is at peer level. In turn, they’re still respectful to me. Parties of bilateral relationships should trust each other and do the best they can do, if the mentee questions the mentor and her/his activities, they cannot work together ....</td>
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Table 1. Perceptions regarding the post-mentoring relationships: Experiences and observations
4. Discussion and Conclusion

There are only a few studies focusing on the post mentoring relationship and thus only indirect findings are available in this field. Diamond & Mullen (1996) performed a qualitative study on co-authoring forms of post-mentorship. The authors emphasized that the traditional mentoring relationship resembled the uncrossable boundaries between a "father" and a "child" and this asymmetrical relationship weakened the possibility of co-authoring during post-mentoring. Post mentoring has been recently addressed rather by e-mentoring studies. For example, Headlam- Wells et al. (2010) found that post-mentoring phase in e-mentoring system contributed strongly to certain aspects such as self-promotion, networking, the ability to identify how to develop professionally, work-home balance and time management. Smith et al. (2008) reported that the interactive dialogue between the mentor and mentee under the e-mentoring conditions improved the post-mentoring self-efficacy rather than providing a psychological and career support to the mentee. These findings of the previous studies show that there is still a need for further clarification of the post-mentoring relationship.

In this study, the relationship between a mentor and mentee who continued to work in the same academic unit after the mentoring process was analysed. The senior mentors who were included in the study explained the separation and redefinition phases of the relationship. The mentors’ perceptions indicate that the final phases of a mentoring process cannot be divided clearly contrary to what is claimed in the literature. This finding is more consistent with the approach that combines the separation and redefinition phases [30]. For example, formal termination of the mentoring relationship does not mean transition to the separation phase for the mentees who continue their academic careers in the same unit because they still need the strong interest, support and reference of their ex-mentors until they are appointed to their new positions in the same organization. During this period, the mentor and mentee maintain an informal relationship and carry out joint activities; while the mentee still expects a strong interest from the ex-mentor in this transitional period until s/he is appointed to her/his new position. Therefore, this phase rather represents a kind of ongoing commitment rather than a separation. This finding is consistent with the concept of strategic loyalty that relies on the rational projections such as career, political concern, labour needs and organizational position in the mentoring relationships as suggested by Oglenksy (2008). This study also revealed a similar finding. The fact that the mentees could not be separated from their mentors immediately was found to be associated with their continued strategic expectations. The strategic dimension of loyalty is confirmed by the fact that some of the ex-mentees experienced conflict of interest with their ex-mentors after they were appointed to their new positions. Moreover, it is again consistent with the fact that some mentors who needed the assistance of their mentees or saw the mentees as their competitors wanted to sustain their relationships and thus delayed the independence of their mentees. Therefore, the antecedents and consequences of the reciprocal strategic commitment, which has not been studied extensively in the mentoring relationships, seem to be attractive enough to be
explored as a special research question.

Emerging independence and separation usually develops at the redefinition phase in which the mentees are appointed to their new positions and their strategic expectations decrease. Moreover, those mentors who were experienced in cultivating several mentees stated that the pace of developing independence of the mentees who were appointed to the new positions varied depending on their personal traits. It is known that the psychological maturity of a mentee facilitates her/his transition to adulthood [20]. Furthermore, the attitudes of some mentors may also slow down this process. When the mentors always want to see their mentees as their students and want them to be their copies, the process of developing independence is decelerated. An effective mentoring relationship is not supposed to create a clone of a mentor [12, 32].

Patriarchal relationships, tendency to provide protection, expectation of the experienced professors to be respected were the common elements underlined in this study. Mentoring relationship is known to be one of the strongest paternalist relationships [15]. Aycan et al. (2000) explains that in a paternalistic relationship, the role of the superior is to provide guidance, protection, nurturing and care to the subordinate, and the role of the subordinate, in return, is to be loyal and deferential to the superior. Particularly certain cultural characteristics might be increasing the paternalistic tendency. Ramaswami & Dreher (2010) found in their study that the socio-cultural context influenced certain aspects of mentoring. They argued that in traditional hierarchical cultures such as India, mentor’s overinvolvement in a mentee’s life might be explained by paternalistic leadership.

In this study, only one mentor referred to peer relationship or friendship to be formed between the parties and frequently mentioned in the mentoring literature. Therefore, no strong finding could be found regarding the creation of a horizontal relationship at the redefinition phase. This can be interpreted as the mentors still have the implicit perception of vertical relationship as a reflection of paternalistic tendency. Similarly, Buyukgoze- Kavas et al. (2010) argue that in a hierarchical relationship between the mentor and mentee, the perception of the mentor as an authority reduces the mentee’s satisfaction with mentoring. Furthermore, Turkish students think that the professors have a wide experience and wisdom and this makes it difficult to establish a horizontal relationship.

However, universities all around the world are now more dynamic and the academics are mobilized more, while the academic relationships are diversified and interactions have a varying nature. Such changes seem to have a probable impact on the conventional approaches in the academic world. The views of the participants also confirm this finding. They think that the universities in Turkey should change their traditional policy of cultivating their own human resources; continuous internal promotion will narrow the vision of young academics and weaken the internal dynamics of the universities. All these remarks point out that it is inevitable to change the mentoring approach of the academy in the light of the global developments in the field of education and many new research questions can be generated regarding the dynamics of mentoring.

Some researchers criticize that the mentoring research is mainly limited to the mentee perspective and qualitative methods are not used adequately and recommend the researchers to focus on different data sources [17]. In fact, although this study that was conducted according to the qualitative design was limited to a small sample of mentors who had experience in cultivating several mentees, it enabled us to see different aspects of the separation and redefinition phases of the mentoring relationship. It should be noted, however, that the findings of the study has limited explanation about the post-mentoring process in the academic organizations and does not allow direct generalization due to the qualitative research tradition. Moreover, this study had a constraint by referring only to the perception of the mentors, given Chao’s (1998) call for parallel analysis of the mentors and mentees. This study is considered to be a starting point to analyse the perceptions of the mentees in a future study after this one. Nevertheless, reciprocal strategic commitment of the parties in the mentoring relationship, perceptions of the new-old generations regarding the phases of the relationship might give an inspiration for new research questions in the future studies. It can be suggested that there is still a need for further studies for in-depth analysis of different perspectives because the mentoring relationship represents a characteristic dimension of university culture.

REFERENCES


