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Lewis Z. Schlosser

*University of Maryland - College Park*

Sarah Knox

*Marquette University, sarah.knox@marquette.edu*

Alissa R. Moskowitz

*Marquette University*

Clara E. Hill

*University of Maryland - College Park*

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# A Qualitative Examination of Graduate Advising Relationships: The Advisee Perspective

Lewis Z. Schlosser

*Department of Counseling & Personnel Services  
University of Maryland  
College Park, MD*

Sarah Knox

*School of Education, Department of Counseling & Educational  
Psychology, Marquette University  
Milwaukee, WI*

Alissa R. Moskovitz

*School of Education, Department of Counseling & Educational  
Psychology, Marquette University  
Milwaukee, WI*

Clara E. Hill

*Department of Psychology, University of Maryland  
College Park, MD*

**Abstract:** Sixteen 3rd-year counseling psychology doctoral students were interviewed about their relationships with their graduate advisors. Of those students, 10 were satisfied and 6 were unsatisfied with their advising relationships. Satisfied and unsatisfied students differed on several aspects of the advising relationship, including (a) the ability to choose their advisors, (b)

the frequency of meetings with their advisors, (c) the benefits and costs associated with their advising relationships, and (d) how conflict was dealt with in the advising relationship. Furthermore, all of the satisfied students reported that their advising relationships became more positive over time, whereas many of the unsatisfied students reported that their advising relationships got worse (e.g., became more distant) over time.

We believe, as do many others (e.g., Gelso, 1979, 1993, 1997; Gelso & Lent, 2000; Magoon & Holland, 1984; Schlosser, 2002; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001), that the graduate advising relationship can profoundly affect a psychology graduate student's professional development within and even beyond her or his training program. This is because advisors typically facilitate their advisees' progress through the program, work with students on research requirements (i.e., theses and dissertations), and serve in other capacities for their students (e.g., providing clinical supervision, facilitating professional development). Despite the importance of the advising relationship, however, an extensive literature review revealed only one published empirical study focused specifically on advisor– advisee relationships (i.e., Schlosser & Gelso, 2001).

Schlosser and Gelso (2001) constructed and validated the Advisory Working Alliance Inventory (AWAI), a paper-and-pencil, self-report measure to assess the working alliance between the advisor and advisee from the advisee's perspective. The advisory working alliance was defined as "that portion of the relationship that reflects the connection between advisor and advisee that is made during work toward common goals" (p. 158). That study provided initial evidence of the importance of the working alliance in the graduate advising relationship. For example, student ratings of the advisory working alliance were related positively to student self-ratings of research self-efficacy and of the advisory alliance were positively correlated with students' perceptions of the advisor's expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. These findings underscore the advisor's role in terms of facilitating relevant outcomes in advisees, as well as the importance of the advisor's personal and professional qualities in forming and maintaining working alliances with advisees.

Schlosser and Gelso's (2001) study was limited, however, in that they only examined perceptions of the advisory working alliance.

The working alliance, although important, does not fully capture all of the components of the graduate advising relationship (Gelso & Schlosser, 2001; Hill, 1997; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). For example, personal (e.g., non-school-related) relationships might form between advisor and advisee that are not a part of the advisory working alliance yet are still important components of the overall advising relationship. In addition, as the advising relationship naturally progresses over time and the student matures professionally from student to colleague, the faculty–student relationship is also likely to undergo changes. The AWAI was not designed to examine the evolution of the advising relationship throughout graduate school. Therefore, we believe that there is a need for research that examines the advising relationship more broadly than the AWAI currently allows.

Before proceeding, however, we believe it is important to distinguish between *mentoring* and *advising*. This distinction is important to make because the construct of mentoring has received a fair amount of attention in the literature (e.g., Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002; Russell & Adams, 1997), and mentoring has been suggested as an important aspect of protégé professional development (Gelso & Lent, 2000). We do not, however, see advising and mentoring as synonymous. *Mentoring* refers to a positive relationship in which protégés learn professional skills (Cronan-Hillix, Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, & Davidson, 1986; Russell & Adams, 1997), whereas *advising* refers to a positive or negative relationship in which guidance may or may not be provided with regard to professional skill development (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). For the present study, *advising* is a more appropriate term than *mentoring*. First, graduate advising relationships can be positive or negative. Because the term *mentor* has an inherently positive connotation (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001), students are not likely to report having poor relationships with mentors. Second, although a few students report being assigned or finding a mentor, more often they report being assigned or finding an advisor. For example, Schlosser and Gelso (2001) found that 100% of the 281 graduate student respondents indicated that they had an advisor, whereas Cronan-Hillix et al. (1986) found that only half the students in their sample reported having a mentor. Lastly, definitions of *mentor* have been inconsistent in the research, and no proposed definition of *mentor* describes a graduate advisor adequately (i.e.,

definitions have either been overly simplified or too complex). For these reasons, we decided that the term *advisor* was more appropriate for the current study. This decision allowed us to define the construct of *advisor* clearly, and removed the positive bias inherent in *mentor* so that participants could talk about nonpositive experiences they might have had with their advisors.

We defined *advisor* as the faculty member who has the greatest responsibility for helping guide the advisee through the graduate program. In addition, the advisor may influence the advisees' professional development (e.g., research, practice, career choice). It is important to note that counseling psychology doctoral programs use several different words to identify the person who performs the roles and functions of what we have termed an *advisor* (e.g., *advisor*, *major professor*, *committee chair*, *dissertation chair*; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001).

Given the lack of empirical research on advising relationships, we thought that a qualitative methodology would be a good way to probe advisees' experiences deeply without constraining responses. We also believed that qualitative research would allow for a different, and potentially richer, description of advising relationships by using words rather than numbers for data. In addition, we wanted to know about specific aspects of the advising relationship because we felt that they would paint a more complete picture of the advising relationship, which would, in turn, illuminate participants' other responses.

Hence, we used the consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology developed by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997). In CQR, a small number of cases is examined extensively to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, data analysis is conducted using a consensual group process, and conclusions emerge inductively from the data. In addition, an auditor checks the consensus judgments yielded by the analyses to ensure that the conclusions are as unbiased as possible and are based on data. We selected the CQR methodology (over other qualitative approaches) because CQR possesses some notable strengths. First, CQR uses multiple judges, as well as an auditor, thereby lessening the likelihood that any one person's perspective will unduly influence the data analysis process. Second,

CQR provides a consistent yet flexible approach to the data gathering process. The interview is semistructured, which provides consistency across cases, yet allows for flexibility wherein interviewers may deviate from the protocol as needed on the basis of an individual participant's responses.

Our purpose in this study was to investigate students' perceptions of their relationships with their graduate advisors. To accomplish this task, we queried participants about several major areas of their advising relationships, including descriptions of the relationship itself (e.g., its foci), expectations about the relationship, and interpersonal interactions between themselves and their advisors. We were also interested in understanding the gains and costs students associated with their advising relationships, as well as any changes in the relationship over time. We chose to focus on counseling psychology (as opposed to other applied areas of psychology) in order to examine the advising relationship intensely in one area of psychology.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

*Advisees.* Sixteen 3rd-year counseling psychology doctoral students (14 women, 2 men; 14 Caucasian, 2 biracial) from nine universities participated in this study. Advisees ranged in age from 24 to 50 years ( $M = 33.63$ ,  $SD = 8.47$ ) and had been with their current advisor from 5 to 36 months ( $M = 28.56$ ,  $SD = 8.93$ ). Three had changed advisors at some point in their graduate program, and 13 indicated no such change. Ten advisees identified their current advisors as female, 6 as male; advisees estimated that their advisors were African American (3), Asian American (1), Caucasian (10), and multiracial (2). Students estimated the age of their current advisor to be between 31 and 70 years ( $M = 44.53$ ,  $SD = 9.96$ ).

*Interviewers and judges.* Three researchers conducted the audiotaped interviews and served as the primary research team: a 28-year-old Caucasian male, a 39-year-old Caucasian female, and a 24-year-old Caucasian female. At the beginning of the study, one

researcher was a 4th-year graduate student in a counseling psychology doctoral program, another was an assistant professor in a department of counseling and educational psychology, and another was a 2nd-year student in a counseling master's program. A 52-year-old Caucasian female professor in a department of psychology served as the auditor. (All are authors of this article.)

Prior to conducting the interviews, the primary team discussed their own experiences as advisees, as well as their biases about the advising relationship. During data analysis, similar discussions occurred periodically to enable the team to be mindful of their biases and try to set them aside. We briefly report these expectations to provide context for the analysis. Two of the researchers had extremely positive advising relationships focused mainly on research, career guidance, and program requirements. One researcher had never been a doctoral student and did not have clear expectations about the doctoral advising relationship. The auditor, who had advised students for 27 years, felt that advising was one of her favorite job tasks; she thought that the major focus of the relationship was research, and that the relationship varied across advisees.

## *Measures*

*Demographic form.* The demographic form requested that participants provide basic information about age, gender, race, year in doctoral program, duration of current advising relationship, and whether or not they had ever changed advisors during doctoral training. Participants also answered questions about their advisors' gender, race, and estimated age.

*Interview protocol.* The first, semistructured interview opened with questions designed to gather general information about the advising relationship, such as a description of the advisor and the advising relationship, how the advisee and advisor had been matched, and the focus of the advising relationship. In the next section of the interview, we sought specific information about the advising relationship to provide context for the advisees' experience. Thus, we inquired about the frequency and modality (i.e., individual or group) of advisor–advisee meetings, behaviors related to professional development, and

students' comfort level regarding sharing personal and professional issues with their advisors. The interview then moved to questions about the benefits and costs of the advising relationship, as well as about conflict management between advisee and advisor. In closing the interview, we asked advisees to describe the strongest memories of their advising relationships and to rate their advising relationships on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *very negative*, 3 = *mixed*, 5 = *very positive*). Each question was asked of every participant, but the interviewers probed for additional information as was deemed necessary to develop a more complete understanding of that particular advising relationship.

A follow-up interview provided an opportunity for the researchers to ask any questions that may have arisen after the initial interview and for the participant to provide clarifications and/or alter previous comments. It also provided a chance for both researcher and participant to explore any further thoughts and reactions that might have been stimulated by the first interview.

## *Procedures*

*Recruiting advisees.* Twelve programs were randomly selected from the list of counseling psychology doctoral programs accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA; American Psychological Association, 1999). The training directors of these programs were sent a letter asking if we could contact their 3rd-year students to invite them to participate in a study of graduate advising relationships. The letter explained that interested program directors need only provide the names and addresses of their current 3rd-year doctoral students. We believed that 3rd-year doctoral students would be able to talk about their advising relationships with some substance because they would have greater perspective on their experiences in graduate school with their advisors than their counterparts in the first 2 years of their training. Furthermore, we thought that these students would be engaged in significant ongoing work with their advisors during the interview period. We specifically did not select more advanced students because we believed that they would report very different experiences from students in the midst of their program. As the more advanced student prepares for internships and jobs, the advising



relationship is likely to change from that of advisor–advisee to that of peer or colleague. Finally, empirical research (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001) has identified the length of the advising relationship as an important factor to consider. For all these reasons, we selected 3rd-year doctoral students.

Training directors were told that participants would complete two confidential, taped phone interviews in which they would respond to questions concerning their advising relationship. Directors were assured that confidentiality would be maintained by the use of code numbers, and that no researcher would ask about the identity of the student's advisor or program. Two weeks after the first contact with program directors, those who had not yet provided names and addresses of 3rd-year counseling psychology doctoral students were recontacted by phone and again invited to participate. For those who declined or still did not respond, this ended their involvement. For those who provided the requested information about students, this also ended their involvement, as any further contact was made with the students directly.

Upon receiving lists of 3rd-year doctoral students from program training directors, a member of the primary team contacted students by letter and invited them to participate in a study of graduate advising relationships, informing them of where we had obtained their contact information. The letter explained that those who agreed to participate would be asked questions about their advising relationship in two taped phone interviews, the first lasting about an hour, the second about 10 min. They were assured that their responses would be confidential via the assignment of code numbers, and that no researcher would make any attempt to identify participants' advisors or programs. Those who agreed to participate were asked to complete and return the consent and demographic forms included with the letter. Participants were also asked to give their names and phone numbers to enable the interviewer to arrange for the first interview. The first interview protocol was also included in this mailing, with the hope that it would help potential participants decide whether or not they wished to participate, and that it would stimulate the responses of those who chose to participate. Upon receipt of the consent and

demographic forms, one of the primary researchers called the participant to set up the first interview.

We contacted 12 graduate programs dispersed nationally using the procedures described above. Nine out of these 12 programs provided us with a list of 3rd-year doctoral students or the e-mail address of their program's electronic mailing list. Of the 52 packets mailed and the two e-mail messages sent to program electronic mailing lists, 16 students agreed to participate.

*Interviewing.* Each of the primary team members completed both the initial and follow-up interviews with 5 to 6 participants. At the end of each interview, the researcher made notes on the interview, indicating how long the interview took and the interviewer's ability to build rapport with the participant. At the conclusion of the first interview, the follow-up interview was scheduled (typically 2 weeks after the initial interview). At the end of the follow-up interview, the interviewer debriefed the participant, then asked if she or he wanted to comment on a draft of the final results.

*Transcripts.* The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim (except for minimal encouragers). All identifying information for participant, advisor, and program was removed, and each participant was assigned a code number to maintain confidentiality.

*Draft of final results.* Those participants who requested one ( $n = 8$ ) were sent a draft of the final results of the study for their comments. Participants were asked to comment on the degree to which their individual experiences were captured by the group results. They were also asked to confirm that their confidentiality had been maintained. Only 1 participant returned comments; she indicated that she was glad the study had been conducted and felt that we had captured her experiences as an advisee. She also offered some suggestions for future research.

## *Procedures for Analyzing Data*

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methods (Hill et al., 1997) were used to analyze the data. The essence of CQR is reaching

consensus about the meaning and categorization of the data. Consensus is achieved through the primary team discussing their individual perceptions and then agreeing on a final conceptualization. At least some disagreement is the norm but is worked through until eventual agreement is reached. Two of the three members of the primary team knew each other well, whereas the third was initially less known. In addition, the second author (i.e., the assistant professor) was more familiar with the methodology than the other two members of the primary team (i.e., the graduate students).

The key features of CQR are a reliance on words rather than numbers to describe phenomena, as well as the intensive study of a small number of cases. Additionally, the context of the whole case is used to understand specific parts of the experience, and the analysis process is inductive, with understanding built from observations of the data rather than imposing a structure on the data ahead of time. Finally, the process involves dividing responses to open-ended questions from interviews into domains (i.e., topic areas), constructing core ideas (i.e., abstracts or brief summaries) for all material within each domain for each individual case, and then developing categories to describe the themes in the core ideas within domains across cases (cross-analysis). Consensus is achieved to ensure that the "best" construction is developed considering all of the data, and an auditor checks the consensus judgments to ensure that the primary team does not overlook important data. Finally, the primary team continually returns to the raw data to make sure that their conclusions are sound and are based on the data.

*Coding of domains.* A "start list" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of domains was developed by the primary team by grouping the questions (on the basis of content) from the interview protocol. The domains were altered after reviewing the first few transcripts and then further refined by going through additional transcripts. Additional changes were made throughout the process to reflect the emerging data. Once the domains were set, the cases that had been initially coded were reexamined, and their coding was modified to be consistent with the domain list. Using the transcripts, the three judges independently assigned each meaning unit (a complete thought, ranging from one phrase to several sentences) from each transcript

into one or more domains. The judges discussed the assignment of meaning units into domains until consensus was reached.

*Coding of core ideas.* Each judge independently read all data within each domain for a specific case and wrote what she or he considered to be the core ideas (i.e., concise descriptions of the general concepts of the data). Judges discussed each core idea until they reached consensus about content and wording. A consensus version was then developed for each case, which included the core ideas and the corresponding interview data for each of the domains. The auditor examined the consensus version of each case and checked the accuracy of both the domain coding and the wording of the core ideas, making comments and suggestions for changes. The judges then discussed the auditor's remarks and again reached consensus.

*Cross-analysis.* The purpose of the cross-analysis is to cluster the core ideas within domains across cases. The initial cross analyses were done on 14 of the 16 cases, with 2 cases left out as a stability check (Hill et al., 1997). Each member of the primary team examined the core ideas from all cases for each domain and independently created categories that best captured these core ideas. The team then came to consensus on the conceptual labels of the categories and the specific core ideas that belonged in each category.

After this initial set of categories was established, the judges returned to the final consensus versions of each case to determine whether the cases contained data not previously coded for any of the categories. If such data were discerned (as determined by a consensus judgment of the primary team), the consensus version of the case was altered accordingly to reflect this category, and the core idea was then added to the appropriate category in the cross-analysis. Categories and domains were thus continually revised until everyone felt assured that the data were well represented. The auditor then reviewed the cross-analysis; the auditor's suggestions were considered by the primary team and incorporated if consensus was reached.

*Stability check.* After the initial cross-analysis was complete, the remaining 2 cases (temporarily omitted in the initial cross-analysis) were added back in to see if the designations of general, typical, and variant changed, and also to see if the team felt that new categories

needed to be added to accommodate the new cases. The remaining cases did not alter the results substantially, and hence the findings were considered stable.

## *Results*

During data analysis, it became apparent that our participants were describing two very different kinds of advising relationships. For this reason, we divided the sample on the basis of whether the student was satisfied or unsatisfied with her/his relationship with her/his advisor. To determine how to categorize each of the 16 cases (i.e., satisfied or unsatisfied), we looked at the participants' responses to their description of the advising relationship (e.g., positive, neutral, or negative). In cases where the decision was not clear, we incorporated a more complete review of the data (i.e., looking at the majority of the transcript) to assess whether or not a particular participant was satisfied. Cases were not deemed "satisfied" or "unsatisfied" until consensus among the primary team members was reached. After consensus was reached, we used the students' Likert-type ratings of their advising relationships to "triangulate" our findings (i.e., to collect data from different methods; Hill et al., 1997). Students whom we deemed (via the process just described) satisfied with their advising relationships consistently rated these relationships as 4 or greater on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *very positive*;  $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ). Conversely, students whom we deemed unsatisfied with their advising relationships consistently rated these relationships as 3 or lower ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ).

We structured the results on a domain by domain basis. Within each domain, we first present findings that emerged from the 10 students who were satisfied with their advising relationships. Then, we present results from the 6 students who were not satisfied with their advising relationships. Table 1 displays results for both the satisfied and unsatisfied cases. For the satisfied cases, categories were considered general if all 10 cases were represented, typical if there were 5 to 9 cases, and variant if there were 2 to 4 cases. For the unsatisfied cases, categories were considered general if all 6 cases were represented, typical for 3 to 5 cases, and variant if there were only 2 cases.

## *Description of Advising Relationship*

Typically, satisfied students described their advising relationships as positive. For example, one student stated, "I feel very comfortable with her and I don't mean warm and fuzzy all the time; I feel comfortable expressing disagreements to her, and I know when disagreements come up, we are able to bring it to the table and talk about it." Similarly, students also reported that their advisors were supportive, friendly, collegial, and respectful; 2 students indicated that their advisors worked to level the playing field so they did not feel a power differential.

Unsatisfied students generally described their advising relationships as negative or neutral. One student, for example, felt that it was hard to establish rapport with her advisor because he was cold and distant. Other students saw their advising relationships as shallow or businesslike. For instance, 1 student felt that her advisor was superficial, and another student experienced her advisor as focusing solely on classes and as disinterested in her as a person.

## *Advisor-Advisee Pairing*

Satisfied students typically reported that they were able to choose their advisor and only variantly reported being assigned to their advisor. In contrast, all 6 unsatisfied students reported that they had been assigned to work with their advisor upon entry to the doctoral program.

## *Meetings With Advisor*

Students satisfied with their advising relationships generally indicated having individual meetings with their advisors, whether regularly scheduled or spontaneous. In addition, students typically reported being a part of group meetings (e.g., research teams) with their advisors. With regard to frequency, satisfied students typically reported frequent meetings (e.g., weekly) with their advisors, and only variantly reported infrequent meetings (e.g., once per semester). Unsatisfied students generally had infrequent individual meetings with their advisors (e.g., once or twice a semester). These students also

variantly were part of group meetings with their advisors. One student, for example, was a member of her advisor's research team.

### *Focus of the Advising Relationship*

Satisfied students described several foci of the advising relationship. First, they generally reported that research was a part of the advising relationship, whether related to theses, dissertations, or other projects. For example, 1 student reported that he was working with his advisor on multiple aspects of his dissertation (i.e., getting participants, analyzing data, and writing up the results). Second, students generally reported that discussing program requirements was a part of their advising relationship. Some examples of these requirements include coursework, dissertation, internship, comprehensive examinations, and annual student reviews. Third, satisfied students typically reported that they focused on career guidance with their advisors as a part of their advising relationship. For example, 1 student reported discussing career aspirations with her advisor and receiving guidance from her advisor about what the student needed to do to achieve those aspirations.

Unsatisfied students also described several foci of the advising relationship. First, they typically reported that research was a part of the advising relationship, whether related to theses or dissertations, or to other projects. These students also variantly reported that research was not part of the advising relationship. One student, for instance, indicated that her advisor was not interested in her dissertation. Second, unsatisfied students typically indicated that program requirements were a part of the advising relationship. Some students, for example, felt that dealing with the tasks of graduate school was the only reason that they had relationships with their advisors. Third, career guidance was typically not a part of advising relationships for unsatisfied students. One student, for example, felt that her advisor was inaccessible for discussing career concerns.

### *Professional Interactions With Advisor*

Typically, satisfied students indicated that their advisors encouraged them to participate in professional conferences and/or

introduced them to important people. For example, 1 student indicated that his advisor encouraged conference attendance because they were positive, enjoyable professional experiences. Variantly, however, these students indicated that their advisors did not encourage conference participation and/or make important introductions.

In contrast to the satisfied students, unsatisfied students typically indicated that their advisors did not encourage them to participate in professional conferences nor introduce them to important people. Only variantly did students indicate that such activities occurred. For example, 1 student indicated that her advisor encouraged her to present her research at a conference.

### *Comfort Disclosing Professional Information With Advisor*

Satisfied students typically reported feeling very comfortable disclosing aspects of their professional lives to their advisors. One student shared her insecurities around her abilities, and another student talked about his doubts concerning his career choice. Variantly, students reported feeling cautious talking about their professional lives with their advisors. Here, 1 student, who was concerned about how much to disclose, indicated that she talked in a very general, nondefensive manner because she did not want to sound like she "has a *DSM-IV* diagnosis."

Unsatisfied students, however, typically reported feeling cautious talking about their professional lives with their advisors. One student indicated that she was never comfortable talking to her advisor because he was unpredictable (i.e., sometimes supportive, other times not). Another student felt that sharing any negative feelings would be politically unsafe.

### *Comfort Disclosing Personal Information With Advisor*

Typically, satisfied students indicated caution about sharing personal information with their advisors. One student stated that she would only share personal information as it affected her professional life, whereas other students indicated that it was simply not their style



to share too much of themselves in a professional context. Variantly, some students did express a high degree of comfort sharing personal information with their advisors. In fact, 1 student indicated that he would have been less satisfied with his advising relationship if he could not have talked about personal information with his advisor.

All 6 unsatisfied students indicated being cautious sharing personal information with their advisors. One student felt that her advisor was not interested in her personally and that she could not talk to her advisor because he was "like a stranger" to her. Another student said that he was not comfortable sharing anything about his personal life with his advisor.

### *Initial Expectations From the Advising Relationship*

Satisfied students typically indicated that they had expected a collegial or supportive relationship with their advisor. One student, for example, expected her advisor to be a "mentor" and professional role model; another student wanted someone who was interested in the person's whole experience of graduate school (i.e., professional and personal matters). Students variantly expected program guidance and help with their dissertations. For example, one student wanted her advisor's assistance to complete her coursework and dissertation in a timely fashion.

Interestingly, unsatisfied students generally indicated that they, too, expected a collegial and/or supportive relationship with their advisors. For example, 1 student expected to be interpersonally close with the faculty and with her advisor; however, this student reported that her expectations were unmet. Students also typically expected program guidance and help with their dissertations. One student, for example, expected her advisor to discuss her progress in the program.

### *Change in Students' Expectations Since Entering Graduate School*

Typically, satisfied students indicated wanting even more guidance now from their advisors than they had initially expected. One student, for instance, felt that she needed to learn as much as possible

during her remaining time in the program and hoped that her advisor would "give me what I need before I leave." Students variantly reported no changes in expectations.

Generally, students who were unsatisfied with their advising relationships indicated that their expectations of their advisors were unmet or lowered over time. As an illustration, 1 student now asked little of her advisor and felt that her advisor gave little to her. Another student stated, "I expected more personal interest in me and more help adjusting... I expected my advisor to give a shit about me."

### *Benefits of the Advising Relationship*

Students satisfied with their advising relationships generally reported various, nonspecific gains. For example, one student felt that she received fairly large gains from her advisor with regard to teaching, whereas another student felt that her advisor was an excellent role model. Other students acknowledged receiving help with how to navigate a doctoral program successfully, how to apply for and obtain clinical internships, and how to network. In the first of two typical categories, students reported positive growth in their work as researchers. For instance, students reported learning how to design and complete research projects, run statistical analyses, and write manuscripts. In the second typical category, students indicated that their advisors were accessible. For example, several students commented that their advisors' doors were always open and that students felt comfortable dropping in without an appointment. Finally, students variantly reported positive growth in their work as therapists. Students here reported positive changes in their clinical skills and increased counseling self-efficacy (note that the advisor had also served as the clinical supervisor at some point for these students).

In the second group of students, despite being unsatisfied, they nevertheless generally reported nonspecific gains from their advising relationships. For example, 1 advisee felt that her advisor gave her a political advantage because the advisor could "pull more weight" in the department, whereas another student felt that research opportunities were available to her because of her advisor.

## *Costs of the Advising Relationship*

Satisfied students typically reported that they went to other sources (e.g., other faculty, supervisors, or students) if their advisor was not meeting some of their needs. For example, 1 student said that he sought out a neuropsychologist for content advice on his dissertation, and another student reported relying on her classmates for support. Students also typically reported some political disadvantages because of their advising relationships (e.g., negative assumptions made about students by others based on their advisors' interests or interpersonal style). One student, for example, was seen as being disinterested in research and disorganized because her advisor was known to have these qualities. Another student felt concerned that her advisor, as an assistant professor, lacked the power to speak her mind openly to her colleagues and to support the student if the student wanted to do something different from the norm.

Whereas only some of the satisfied students reported going to other sources if their advisor was not meeting their needs, all 6 of the unsatisfied students reported having to go elsewhere to get their advising needs met. For example, 1 student said that she sought out everything she needed from other people because she did not get anything from her advisor. Students also generally reported a lack of mentoring by their advisors. For example, 1 student felt like she had to figure everything out for herself and was mad and resentful toward her advisor because of this lack of guidance. Another student described her advising relationship as not fostering her development as a professional. Finally, students typically reported that their advisors were inaccessible. As an illustration, 1 student reported talking with her advisor only once all year in an informal, unplanned meeting in the hallway.

## *Conflict Management Between Advisor and Advisee*

Satisfied students typically reported that conflict was dealt with openly and that working through any conflict strengthened the advising relationship. Several students, for instance, felt that their advisors were very open, so they felt comfortable addressing difficult

subjects. Furthermore, 1 student reported that processing conflict improved the depth of her advising relationship. Students variantly reported a lack of conflict in the advising relationship.

Unsatisfied students typically reported that conflict was avoided or not discussed in their advising relationship. As examples, one student felt like she would avoid her advisor or “kiss her ass” if there was any conflict; another student thought her advisor was unaware of any conflict, and a 3rd student indicated that her advisor’s personality style “would not allow for conflict.”

### *Changes in Advising Relationship Over Time*

Students who were satisfied with their advising relationships generally reported that their advising relationships became more positive over time. Most of these students indicated that they had grown closer to their advisors and felt that their comfort with their advisors had increased as a result of getting to know their advisors better.

Typically, unsatisfied students reported that they became more distant from their advisors or that their advising relationships worsened over time. For example, some of these students began to critically examine their advising relationships, mostly because they felt mistreated, which led them to feel disappointed with their advisors. Other students felt that their advisors became less accessible during the course of their graduate program, contributing to students’ dissatisfaction with the advising relationship. Unsatisfied students variantly reported that their advising relationships stayed the same or became more positive. One student, for example, though still globally dissatisfied with her advising relationship, gained some respect for her advisor after initially seeing her advisor in a fairly negative light.

### ***Strongest Memory of Advising Relationship***

Satisfied students generally recalled positive events as the strongest memory of their advising relationship, whether about professional or personal issues. For example, 1 student felt like a professional and a peer when her advisor approached her about

publishing her thesis, whereas another student felt personally special when her advisor left a conversation with other faculty members to come check on the student soon after the death of the student's father.

Unsatisfied students reported that the strongest memories of their advising relationships were typically positive, in which they felt supported about professional issues. For example, 1 student remembered her advisor inviting several students to her home for a potluck dinner and giving a workshop on how to submit proposals for professional conferences. Variantly, students recalled negative events in which they felt rejected by their advisors. For example, when 1 student approached her advisor because she needed to talk about an important issue, the advisor's response was, "How long will this take?" The student felt like her advisor "blew her off"; as a result of this interaction, the student did not want any further interactions with her advisor.

## **Discussion**

Overall, several differences were noted between satisfied and unsatisfied advising relationships. Thematically, most of these discrepancies can be clustered into interpersonal (e.g., satisfaction, comfort disclosing, conflict management) and instructional (e.g., research, career guidance, and professional development) components. Interpersonal components focus on the relational concerns between advisors and advisees, whereas instructional components focus on the didactic or task-focused nature of advisor-advisee interactions related to training (Kahn & Gelso, 1997). The recognition of interpersonal and instructional components of professional psychology training is consistent with previous empirical research on research training (Gelso, 1997; Kahn & Gelso, 1997) and graduate advising (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). In addition, some other issues emerged (i.e., how advisor and advisee were paired to work together, expectations about the advising relationship) that did not fit cleanly into either cluster yet appear to be important features of the advising relationship. Each is amplified below.

## *Interpersonal Components*

Students who were satisfied with their advising relationships described the relationship as positive, reported having rapport with their advisors, and felt that these relationships improved over time. This finding is consistent with Schlosser and Gelso (2001), who found that advisor–advisee rapport was an important component of a good advisory working alliance. Conversely, students who were unsatisfied with their advising relationships described these relationships as shallow, businesslike, or negative. It may be that unsatisfied students did not get what they were seeking from their advising relationships or perceived more costs than benefits and thus were not satisfied. Alternatively (or perhaps additively), these students may have been exposed to negative advising, which can be potentially damaging to the student (Gelso & Lent, 2000).

Our results also indicated that comfort disclosing professional information with the advisor happens more frequently in satisfied (vs. unsatisfied) advising relationships. Satisfied students typically felt very comfortable disclosing professional information to the advisor, whereas unsatisfied students were cautious doing so. Students who felt comfortable disclosing professional information may have received implicit and/or explicit messages from their advisors that this material was appropriate for advisory meetings, and/or these students felt validated by their advisors when these issues were discussed. For unsatisfied students, a lack of trust between student and advisor may explain the caution in disclosing. This mistrust may also reflect an absence of the interpersonal connection between advisor and advisee that Schlosser and Gelso (2001) found to be an important aspect of a positive advisory working alliance.

Interestingly, students were almost uniformly cautious when it came to sharing personal information with their advisors, regardless of satisfaction with their advising relationship. This may point to the role that students think the advising relationship should play (i.e., it is for professional purposes, not personal ones). Several students (both satisfied and unsatisfied) said that they did not want to share personal information unless it affected their professional work. However, a few students (notably the satisfied students) in our sample reported

enjoying the personal (i.e., non-work-related) relationship with their advisors, and felt that they would be less satisfied with their advising relationships without those personal interactions complementing the professional activities. Therefore, individual advisee personality differences may have dictated the degree to which personal interactions were sought out and/or expected from the advisor. Finally, the advisor's preferences also certainly played a role in the degree to which student and advisor discussed personal and professional information. Advisors may have encouraged or discouraged advisees from sharing personal and/or professional information depending on what they perceived to be their role as advisor.

When it came to conflict management, large differences were noted between satisfied and unsatisfied students. Satisfied students reported that open processing of conflict strengthened the advising relationship; the healthy resolution of interpersonal conflict may have even enhanced satisfaction with the advising relationship. In contrast, unsatisfied students reported that conflict was avoided or not discussed. For the unsatisfied students, this conflict avoidance was usually seen as a function of the advisor's personality (e.g., not allowing for or addressing conflict) or the student's interpersonal style (e.g., showing deference to authority).

## *Instructional Components*

All students had individual meetings with their advisors, and several reported being part of a group (e.g., research team) in which they had regular contact with their advisor. The key difference between satisfied and unsatisfied students was in the frequency of these meetings. In satisfied relationships, contact was quite frequent (e.g., once a week), whereas unsatisfied students saw their advisors as little as once a semester or even once a year. Thinking about the myriad potential functions of the advisor, it is hard to imagine accomplishing very much with annual or semesterly meetings; it is also difficult to imagine having a meaningful relationship with such minimal contact. Conversely, frequent contact was likely to have allowed satisfied students to feel supported and guided by their advisors, as well as having a place to get their needs met. Although frequent meetings do not guarantee a positive advising relationship,

regular student–advisor contact was the norm for satisfied students in our sample.

Research appears to have been an essential component of the advising relationship in counseling psychology Ph.D. programs. This finding makes intuitive sense, as completion of the dissertation is a graduation requirement; faculty may also encourage students to be on other research teams. Although advising varies by program, many satisfied students in our sample reported that their advisors served as a guide through both the research process and other aspects of the training program (e.g., coursework, comprehensive examinations). These findings are consistent with the extant literature on graduate advising (Gelso & Schlosser, 2001; Schlosser, 2002). Research was still seen as an important part of unsatisfied advising relationships; however, these students often felt that their advisors did not guide them enough or were not interested in the students' research.

Another significant difference between satisfied and unsatisfied students was the focus on career guidance in the advising relationship. Satisfied students typically received such guidance, whereas unsatisfied students typically did not. Because the purpose of graduate training is the preparation for a professional career, the absence of career guidance was likely an important loss for these students. As evidenced by some of our participants' remarks, the lack of career guidance appears to have contributed to students' dissatisfaction with the advising relationship.

Professional development proved to be another important area in this cluster of instructional components. Encouragement to participate in professional conferences and introductions to people at conferences typically occurred in the context of a satisfied advising relationship and not in unsatisfied ones. These advisor behaviors are likely to communicate the advisor's interest and investment in the student's career. For unsatisfied students whose advisors tended not to encourage conference participation or make professional introductions the message may have been perceived as, "I don't care about your career," regardless of the advisor's intent. Students may also have ignored an advisor's encouragement if they perceived the advising relationship as less than positive.



Perhaps one of the more obvious differences between satisfied and unsatisfied students was the perceived benefits and costs associated with the advising relationship. By definition, satisfied students reported more gains and fewer costs than did their unsatisfied counterparts. Of more interest here is the information about the aspects that are likely to be benefits of a good advising relationship (e.g., student growth as a scientist-practitioner, accessibility of advisor). However, these undoubtedly do not represent all of the benefits necessary for a student to be satisfied with her or his advising relationship. In fact, we believe that other gains (e.g., social support from the advisor) might be facilitative to the advising relationship. Responses from our unsatisfied students point to specific factors (i.e., unmet needs forcing the student to seek help elsewhere, lack of mentoring, inaccessibility of the advisor, political disadvantages) that were absent in their advising relationships. Looking across the data, it appears that professional mentoring and advisor accessibility may be crucial aspects of the advising relationship.

### *Other Issues*

One emergent issue from our results was how students and advisors were paired to work together. Specifically, satisfied students were allowed to choose their advisors, whereas unsatisfied students were assigned to an advisor. Thus, the simple procedure of allowing students to choose an advisor may facilitate the development of a positive and successful advising relationship. Because students often have little control or power in their graduate programs, the ability to choose one's advisor may be tremendously empowering. Conversely, being assigned to an advisor may frustrate the student and could contribute to dissatisfaction with the advising relationship. If the student is assigned to work with an advisor, however, the freedom to change to a different advisor may enhance the student's satisfaction with the advising relationship.

With regard to changes in students' expectations about the advising relationship, satisfied students either wanted continued guidance from their advisors or reported no changes in their expectations (often because those expectations were met). In

contrast, unsatisfied students consistently indicated that their initial expectations were unmet and often were even lowered. For these students, having their expectations go unmet appears to have tainted their advising relationships, as several unsatisfied students reported now wanting nothing from their advisors. The findings suggest that it is important for students and advisors to talk about expectations about their relationships; not having such a discussion may set up students and advisors for later disappointment.

## *Summary and Conclusions*

In sum, the positive advising relationship could be described as one in which the members have a good rapport, process conflict openly, and work together to facilitate the advisee's progress through the graduate program and development as an emerging professional. This description shares some common elements with descriptions of mentoring relationships (e.g., Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002; Russell & Adams, 1997). Although a mentoring type of advising relationship may be highly desirable, results from the current study suggest that not all students enjoy that kind of relationship with their advisors. Thus, to build positive advising relationships, both student and advisor must be thoughtful and purposeful about the formation and maintenance of their relationship, paying attention to each person's expectations and goals.

Conversely, students who are unsatisfied with their advising relationships (and have relationships that are neutral or negative) are unlikely to refer to their advisors as mentors, because the term mentor connotes a positive valence. Rather, they might report negative mentoring behaviors, as demonstrated by 1 of our participants who wanted only that his advisor "give a shit" about him. Recently, some research (i.e., Johnson & Huwe, 2002) has identified dysfunctional aspects of mentoring (e.g., mentor neglect, boundary violations, relational conflict). Such aspects parallel the current results from the unsatisfied students, who likewise discussed advisor unavailability and interpersonal conflict. If advisor and advisee were able to identify dysfunctional aspects of their relationship, perhaps they could work together toward improving the quality of that relationship.

Satisfaction with the advising relationship may mean that the relationship is good, or perhaps "good enough" (Gelso, 2001). In a satisfied relationship, students may not perceive missing aspects of the relationship as harmful (i.e., the positive nature of the relationship outweighs what is perceived as lacking). For example, a satisfied student might not care as much about having a more "personal" relationship with the advisor if the student's needs are met in other areas by the advisor (e.g., dissertation, career guidance). Conversely, an unsatisfied student may be more sensitive to "missing" aspects of the advising relationship and may experience them as damaging and/or painful because the overall relationship is not good enough to compensate for such absent elements.

Results from the current study support the notion that advising and mentoring, although not synonymous, do share some common characteristics. Because of the potential overlap between these two areas, an examination of the similarities and differences between the advising and mentoring literatures might be fruitful as a guide for future researchers. However, because of the diversity within the mentoring literature (i.e., mentoring has been studied in many arenas, including business and industry, academia, and community mental health, among others), some parameters are necessary. First, data from Green and Bauer (1995) suggest that mentoring is contextually bound (i.e., mentoring is defined by the arena), and as such, differs across settings (e.g., business and industry, academia). Hence, only research investigating how mentoring in academia is consistent with or divergent from graduate advising will be considered. Second, because the current study focused on the advisee's perceptions of the graduate advising relationship, this discussion will be likewise limited in its scope, focusing on research about the protégé's perceptions of the mentoring relationship. Under these parameters, the mentoring literature is limited to two main areas (i.e., providing descriptive data about mentoring and examining research-related student outcomes); these are the two areas that are discussed below as they pertain to advising relationships.

Descriptive studies have revealed what characteristics protégés deem important in a mentor. For example, several studies (Cronan-Hillix et al., 1986; Knox & McGovern, 1988; Wilde & Schau; 1991)

found that good mentors were typically interested in and supportive of their students, possessed knowledge and demonstrated competence, and evidenced excellent interpersonal skills. These mentors were able to use such qualities to form and maintain relationships with their protégés, as well as to collaboratively work with them. Conversely, bad mentors were described as having extremely poor interpersonal skills, lacking interest in and support for their students, demonstrating incompetence, lacking knowledge, and being inaccessible and unavailable to the student-protégé.

When comparing the above research with the results of the current study, it appears that mentoring and advising do share some common characteristics. In both advising and mentoring, there is a strong emphasis on the interpersonal connection between members of the dyad, a connection that may be the most powerful aspect in the advising relationship. When rapport between advisor and advisee exists, the advisee gets support, knowledge, safety, time, and attention from the advisor. In addition, both advising and mentoring focus partially on the collaborative work (e.g., research) between student and faculty. Thus, advising and mentoring both possess psychosocial and career-related functions. There are also aspects of advisors and mentors that are seen as consistently negative. One example is the availability and accessibility of the advisor or mentor, which appears to consistently differentiate positive advising relationships from negative ones (i.e., in positive advising relationships, advisors are more available or accessible than they are in negative advising relationships).

In reviewing outcome studies of mentoring in academia, we found that these pieces of research have focused largely on research-related outcomes for students, such as research productivity and research self-efficacy; however, this research has yielded inconsistent findings. For example, two studies found that students' perceptions of the mentoring relationship was not important in predicting their scholarly activity (Green & Bauer, 1995; Kahn, 2001), whereas other research (e.g., Cronan-Hillix et al., 1986; Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002) suggested that mentoring can promote student research self-efficacy and productivity (measured by research publications and presentations). Empirical research has consistently found positive

correlations between the graduate advising relationship and research outcomes (Schlosser, 2002; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). The findings from the current study are consistent with the previous research on advising relationships and suggest that advising relationships can have positive effects where research related outcomes are concerned.

Finally, it is important to note that *negative mentoring* is not likely describing a negative relationship but rather a positive relationship with the presence of some negative behaviors (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000). In comparison, *negative advising* is likely describing a negative relationship with severity ranging from relatively minor (e.g., ambivalent feelings about advising relationship) to harmful and psychotoxic. This distinction, which should be incorporated into future research, is likely because of the positive valence attached to the term *mentor*, whereas the term *advisor* is more neutral.

### *Limitations*

Our intent was to investigate the advising relationship in graduate school from the perspective of the student-advisee. We recognize that the results are limited to this sample of 16 3rd-year counseling psychology doctoral students who responded to requests for participation. Because of the potential for self-selection bias, these results may not be representative of those students who chose not to participate. In addition, our sample was mostly Caucasian women; although they make up the majority of psychology graduate students, it could be problematic to generalize our findings to other student groups (e.g., males, advisees of color). Furthermore, until empirical research has examined advising relationships in the other applied areas of psychology (i.e., clinical, school), we do not know if our findings are limited to APA-accredited counseling psychology programs or whether they also reflect advising relationships in these other areas. As noted by Schlosser and Gelso (2001), the developmental stage of the graduate student may play a significant role in the advising relationship. Thus, students at different stages of training may describe their advising relationships in different terms.

We also realize that only the advisees' perspectives were assessed in this study, and as such, we lack the advisors' views about the graduate advising relationship; further inquiry is underway to examine the advisor's perceptions. Additionally, some students may not have wanted to discuss their advisors in a negative light, either because of respect for their advisors or because they feared that their identity (or the identity of their advisor) could be revealed. Finally, it also may have been hard for participants to articulate certain aspects of their relationships because they may not have been aware of their feelings.

### *Implications for Research and Practice*

Our study suggests that students perceive the advising relationship to be an important aspect of their graduate training; this is consistent with previous research (Gelso, 1997). There are a few issues to consider regarding the graduate advising relationship. First, the decision of whether to assign advisees to advisors or to allow them to choose seems important. This decision, which may affect the advising relationship, also communicates the program's position with regard to the students having a voice. Second, frequent contact with one's advisor and the sense of advisor accessibility appears to be a simple yet powerful factor in contributing to satisfaction with the advising relationship. Obviously, the actual frequency of meetings will vary depending on the needs of the student. However, the student may perceive the advisor as inaccessible if the advisor is overloaded with advisees or has no time to meet with the advisee. This speaks to the issue of advisor load (i.e., limiting the number of advisees) so that advisors can devote adequate attention to each advisee. Another issue pertains to the degree of satisfaction with the advising relationship; this may be related to the kind of match between student and advisor. For example, similar interests (e.g., research, career goals, or interpersonal style) may contribute to the perception of match between advisee and advisor; the converse is also likely to be true (i.e., dissimilar interests could detract from perceptions of fit).

Future inquiry could also examine specific types of advisor-advisee interactions (e.g., cross-cultural advising relationships), as well as the effects of the advising relationship on relevant outcomes

for students (e.g., completion of the doctoral degree, satisfaction with graduate school, career choice and satisfaction) and faculty members (e.g., feelings of generativity, job satisfaction). In addition, the training environment may affect the advising relationship, so examining the overall training environment along with the advisor–advisee relationship would be worthwhile. Finally, the role of the advising relationship seems to change over time. Thus, research examining the advising relationship at different points in time (e.g., beginning of graduate training, during internship) may yield fruitful results.

## Notes

- Lewis Z. Schlosser, Department of Counseling and Personnel Services, University of Maryland
- Sarah Knox and Alissa R. Moskovitz, Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, School of Education, Marquette University
- Clara E. Hill, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland.
- Lewis Z. Schlosser is now at the Department of Psychiatry, New York Presbyterian Hospital, Weill Medical College of Cornell University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sarah Knox, Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, School of Education, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201. E-mail: sarah.knox@marquette.edu

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

Domains and Categories of Satisfied and Unsatisfied Cases

Domain	Category	Frequency of:	
		Satisfied cases	Unsatisfied cases
Description of advising relationship (AR)	Positive	Typical	-
	Negative or shallow/null/businesslike	-	General
Advisor/advisee pairing	Chose	Typical	-
	Assigned	Variant	General
Meetings with advisor	Individual meetings	General	General
	Group meetings	Typical	Variant
	Frequent meetings	Typical	-
	Infrequent meetings	Variant	General
Focus of AR	Research a part of AR	General	Typical
	Research not part of AR	-	Variant
	Program requirements part of AR	General	Typical
	Career guidance part of AR	Typical	-
	Career guidance not part of AR	-	Typical
Professional interactions with advisor	Advisor encouraged student to participate in conferences and/or introduced them to important people	Typical	Variant
	Advisor did not encourage student to participate in conferences and/or introduce them to important people	Variant	Typical
Comfort disclosing information with advisor			
Professional	Very comfortable	Typical	Variant
	Cautious	Variant	Typical
Personal	Cautious	Typical	General
	Very comfortable	Variant	-
Expectations about AR			
Initial	Collegial/supportive AR	Typical	General
	Program guidance/help with dissertation	Variant	Typical
Changes	Want more guidance	Typical	-
	No changes	Variant	-
	Expectations unmet and were lowered	-	General
Benefits of the AR	Nonspecific gains	General	General
	Positive growth as a researcher	Typical	-
	Accessibility of advisor	Typical	-

	Positive growth as a therapist	Variant	-
Costs of the AR	Needs not met by advisor so student goes elsewhere	Typical	General
	Lack of mentoring	-	General
	Inaccessibility of advisor	-	Typical
	Political disadvantages	-	Typical
Conflict management between advisor and advisee	Dealt with openly; working through conflict strengthens AR	Typical	-
	No conflict in AR	Variant	-
	Conflict/disconnection is avoided/not discussed in AR	-	Typical
Changes in AR over time	Became more positive	General	-
	Became more distant/got worse	-	Typical
	Stayed the same	-	Variant
Strongest memory of AR	Positive memory	General	Typical
	Negative memory	-	Variant

Note: For the satisfied group (n = 10), general = all 10 cases represented; typical = 5-9 cases represented, variant = 2-4 cases represented. For the unsatisfied group (n = 6), general = all 6 cases represented; typical = 3-5 cases represented, variant = 2 cases represented. Dashes indicate no category for the indicated domain.