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Righting re-writings of the myth of Mentor: a critical perspective on career guidance mentoring

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ABSTRACT: Mentoring is entering the repertoire of career guidance techniques as careers services prioritise socially excluded young people. This article explores the use of Homer's Odyssey as a source of definitions and legitimations of many current accounts of mentoring. Contrasting modern versions of Homer's myth of Mentor with the original, it draws on feminist and class perspectives to question the basis on which such myths are used to proclaim the origins of a very contemporary phenomenon. It identifies an emerging discourse of mentoring, a régime of truth which exerts control not only over the young people being mentored, but also over career guidance staff expected to act as mentors in new Personal Adviser roles.

Mentoring moves centre stage

‘Every teenager between the ages of 13 and 19 is to be assigned a personal “mentor”’ (Prescott & Black, 2000).

This announcement of the new youth support service, Connexions, highlights the fact that mentoring has become an ingredient in many of the current UK government's initiatives in education, and in particular to address social exclusion among young people (Education & Employment Committee, 1998; DfEE, 1998a, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). Several authors now note how fashionable an intervention it has become. It is ‘toasted...and... fêted’ (Gay & Stephenson, 1998, p.53) as ‘an idea whose time has come’ (Piper & Piper, 2000), the latest ‘buzzword’ or ‘flavour of the month’ (Burke & Loewenstein, 1998, p.32), promoted by New Labour with an overwhelmingly positive image that captures a ‘contemporary feel’ (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998, p.40). In 1997, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reported that there were 72 industrial mentoring schemes in over 500 schools, linking with almost 2,000 companies, and involving nearly 17,000 pupils and 4,500 volunteer mentors (Golden & Sims, 1997). The Institute of Careers Guidance (ICG) has recently reported on its two-year Mentoring Action Project (MAP), in which 20 careers services participated, working with 1700 clients (Ford, 1999a, 1999b). Last year's conference of the National Mentoring Network (NMN) not only attracted unprecedented numbers of delegates, but also saw a doubling of its bursary from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (NMN, 1999). This is by no means an exhaustive review of such projects. But mentoring also appears to be a recommended ingredient in the recipe for major new youth transition programmes such as the New Deal Gateway and the Learning Gateway, with their networks of personal advisers and proposals to involve volunteer mentors as well (Bivand, 1999; DfEE, 1999d). The Connexions strategy (DfEE, 2000a) represents the culmination of this trend, claiming that it will create a new profession of Learning Mentors (for young people in school) and Personal Advisers (PAs) (for those in post-16 transition), although, as yet, there is considerable policy confusion about the specific nature of

these roles (Watts, 1999, 2001). This article will initially address concerns about this policy agenda raised by critical authors, who highlight the implications for socially excluded youth. It will then focus upon the implications for mentors themselves, particularly for the emerging PA role as pre-figured by the career guidance mentors of the ICG's MAP (Hulbert, 2000).

Academic attention is gathering apace along with all this mentoring activity. The literature on mentoring is increasing at an exponential rate – a search of education and social science databases [1] traces over 1500 articles, showing that the number of publications on mentoring has more than doubled in each 5-year period over the last 20 years, from an average of 12 articles a year in 1979-84 to an average of 150 a year in the late '90's.

The last decade has seen the emergence of a small but growing body of work on mentoring schemes for 'at risk' or socially excluded young people, although this is relatively recent in the UK, and consists primarily of evaluative research for individual projects (Skinner & Fleming, 1999). Such research is often inevitably small-scale and short-term, and it has also been argued that it may tend to reflect the conformative pressures of demonstrating success to funding bodies (Stronach & Morris, 1994). Career guidance mentoring has been an important element of this type of intervention, particularly through the influence of the MAP. The MAP has not only informed the development of the Learning Gateway and the Connexions strategy, but has also influenced a broader range of projects through the national and European Youthstart programme that funded it (Employment Support Unit, 2000).

However, there does not appear to be a development of significant theoretical concepts or models of mentoring comparable to those in the fields of guidance or counselling. While career guidance mentoring for socially excluded youth is the central concern of this article, the limitations of the literature mean that it will be necessary to draw upon research and theoretical work advanced in other sectors. Just as an early literature review noted (Merriam, 1983), today the bulk of this work continues to be both descriptive rather than analytical, and to be biased in its favourable view of mentoring (Piper & Piper, 2000). Some have pointed to the lack of firm evidence to support the current enthusiasm for mentoring, and note that there is often little to justify claims for its benefits (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Skinner & Fleming, 1999). A very small number of authors broach the issue of harmful mentoring relationships, where mentors may bully their mentees (Maguire, 2000; Philip & Hendry, 1996), or problems between partners may result in psychological damage to either or both (Scandura, 1998).

Other authors note the lack of attempts to critique either the concept or its practice (DeMarco, 1993; Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998; Piper & Piper, 2000; Standing, 1999), and argue that the practice of mentoring increasingly reflects class interests, particularly the intrusion of powerful political, institutional and business priorities into supposedly dyadic relationships (Gay & Stephenson, 1998; Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998; Standing, 1999). Some have pointed to issues of gender and race, and the way in which mentoring may serve as a vehicle for dominant ideologies that reproduce social inequalities and reinforce the *status quo* (Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995; Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998; Standing, 1999). Given increasing levels of economic and social polarisation in Britain over the last two decades, there is a need to recognise the political economy of mentoring rather than accepting the 'apolitical world that contemporary mentoring initiatives seem to inhabit' (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998, p.39). These notes of caution signal the need for a closer examination of the role of power in

mentoring relationships, one which is often linked with the issues of gender in critical literature.

Power and gender in mentoring relationships

Gay & Stephenson (1998) have analysed mentoring relationships in terms of the role of power within them. They situate different styles and aspects of mentoring on a spectrum which ranges from hierarchical to reciprocal, from directive to non-directive, from controlling to empowering. Nonetheless, they seem to ascribe the power to determine where a particular relationship will find itself on this spectrum to the mentor. In addition, they indicate the increasing impact of externally imposed institutional goals, suggesting that such goals tend to drive mentoring towards the more controlling end of the spectrum, in order to achieve required outcomes.

This is an important consideration in the remit of PAs, where, despite the abandonment of funding based on quantities of career action plans, tough targets are still being set by the DfEE for the fairly rapid re-integration of young people into structured learning, where employability and conformance to employers' expectations are central to achieving successful outcomes, and where guidance practitioners are still responsible for policing young people's entitlements to welfare benefits in the context of welfare-to-work policies. Both the feasibility and the desirability of such goals have been questioned within the profession. It has been argued that they are compatible neither with meeting the needs of young people, nor with empowering rational, albeit alternative, lifestyle choices they may wish to make (Ford, 1999a, 1999b; ICG, 1999, n.d.; Law, 2000). Piper & Piper (1999, 2000) in particular have pointed to the dangers of treating socially excluded young people as the objects of external agendas in mentoring:

‘...if the individual is understood as essentially passive and dependent on society for defining meanings values and patterns of activity, then mentoring will be regarded as being concerned with individual behaviour and its modification in accordance with a socially prescribed blueprint. Although constraint may be ruled out, differential status and the demonstration of implicit or explicit benefit will provide the basis for focused behaviour modification, achieved by example or exhortation’ (Piper and Piper, 1999, p.127).

In this scenario, they argue that mentoring may come to represent a form of 'social cleansing or human resource allocation' (Piper & Piper, 2000, p.90). Freedman (1993) has similarly warned of the danger that mentoring may operate as a form of social control in eras where governments are driven by economic considerations to reduce welfare spending, but fear the social unrest that this may create.

One way in which weakness and power can be understood in relation to guidance and career transitions is through the notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) as the differential possession of both ‘formal qualifications and...particular styles or modes of presentation, including speech, forms of social etiquette and competence, as well as degree of confidence and self-assurance’ (Roker, 1993, p.143). Hodkinson (1997) argues that: ‘Young people with less cultural capital, such as the working classes or those from some ethnic minorities have much less chance to influence their own destinations’ (p.6). Gulam and Zulfiqar’s (1998) objections to business people from Docklands mentoring youth in Tower Hamlets (one of the most deprived inner-city areas in this country) highlight the dangers of the powerful acting

as mentors to those in subordinate social groupings. Rather than increasing mentees' cultural capital significantly, such an intervention may obscure their understanding of structural disadvantage and discrimination, while at the same time neutralising any sense that such discrimination needs to be challenged through collective actions based on the solidarity of oppressed groups. In this regard, models of community mentoring for ethnic minorities, which incorporate strong elements of advocacy by mentors and support for self-advocacy by young people (Forbes, 2000; Skinner & Fleming, 1999) might usefully be considered as more appropriate for a wider range of mentoring projects with socially excluded youth.

In other professional development contexts, feminist authors have criticised traditional notions of mentoring as a hierarchical and directive relationship, based on assumptions of paternalism and models of male development, even in all-female dyads (Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995; De Marco, 1993; Standing, 1999). Within such traditional frameworks, the mentor is construed as the powerful member of the dyad, the mentee as the powerless or disempowered, and the process as the transmission of a reified concept of knowledge from the experienced mentor to the novice mentee, reinforcing established practice and invalidating the new. Roberts (1998) broaches the issue of gender stereotypes in mentoring through advocating the notion of 'psychological androgyny'. He argues that this could combine the effective elements of both (male) power and (female) nurture on the part of mentors, in providing instrumental assistance as well as emotional support for their mentees. However, this psychological approach fails to take into account gender as a social construction which also incorporates oppression for women in our society (Reed, 1975). It evades rather than discloses the gender stereotype inherent in the notion of nurture, nor does it address the play of power within mentoring dyads themselves.

Feminist critiques pose 'alternative vision[s of]...women's ways of collaborating' (Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995, p.182) and '[m]entoring relationships that assume both asymmetry *and* equal participation in conjoined work' (Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995, p.189), based on 'the three common characteristics of mentorship - reciprocity, empowerment and solidarity' (DeMarco, 1993, p.1243). While Standing (1999) identifies a 'nurturing versus controlling duality' (p.4) in common paradigms of mentoring, the problem is posed in terms of '[t]he nurturing aspect ...[being] regarded as secondary to its controlling function' (Standing, 1999, p.4).

These critiques all indicate that the problem of power in mentoring is a problem for the mentee. They focus on the vulnerability of the mentee's position, particularly where that location is compounded by class status and/or gender oppression. However, approximately 80% of careers service staff, who will form the core of the Connexions service, as well as a similar proportion of those who volunteer as mentors for projects seeking to help socially excluded youth, are female. Social gender constructions stereotypically represent the role of women as carers and nurturers, both within the family and at work, which feminists interpret as part of their oppression within patriarchal society. This indicates that proposals to adopt primarily nurturing models of mentoring are not themselves unproblematic from the point of view of those who do the mentoring. If dominant discourses of mentoring seek to transmit dominant ideologies (Standing, 1999), and if 'mentoring needs to be subjected to a critique that is appreciative of the present political economy and all its attendant contradictions' (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998, p.44), a feminist critique could usefully address the way in which dominant constructions of mentoring impact not only upon the mentee, but upon the mentor as well. Rather than the simple polarities

of a controlling *versus* nurturing stance by mentor towards mentee, it may be that the operation of power within mentoring dyads is in fact more complex and problematic (see Colley, 2000a, 2000b, for evidence of power dynamics in an empirical research project on mentoring disaffected youth).

In reviewing the literature, and seeking to understand the ways in which mentoring was being defined and legitimated, I became intrigued by the increasing trend for authors to refer to the Ancient Greek myth of Homer's *Odyssey*, an epic poem thought to date back at least 3,000 years, as the original source for the concept of mentoring. Cochran-Smith & Paris (1995) had already identified more than a dozen such papers when they addressed this phenomenon, which continues to proliferate within academic and practitioner-oriented literature. Such references appear at the start of articles and books, or as the introduction to a chapter or section on the mentor's role. They are used to explain and define that role often in a highly rhetorical manner that seemed relevant to a feminist analysis. This article continues by exploring the way in which the literature on mentoring (especially career guidance mentoring) presents this myth, contrasting these representations with the original. It uses this contrast as an heuristic tool to consider the implications for PA roles, contributing to the debate about the power dynamics of mentoring by considering the potential impact upon those who act as the mentors themselves. This question has received scant attention elsewhere, and is obfuscated by the way in which critiques have focused on power dynamics *within* the relationship, rather than the wider power relations in which those relationships, and both members of the dyad, are located.

Modern myths of Mentor

For those not familiar with the *Odyssey*, let us briefly review the story. Odysseus, king of Ithaca, went to fight in the Trojan War, leaving his wife and his infant son Telemachus at home. He appointed his old friend Mentor as guardian to his son and to the royal household, no doubt anticipating a swift victory and return. However, the war lasted ten years, and for a further ten years Odysseus was kept wandering, having incurred the wrath of the gods. Meanwhile, young nobles were occupying his palace and laying suit to his wife in the hope of usurping power. Eventually the goddess Athene interceded to ensure Odysseus' safe return. Part of her role was to prepare Telemachus, by then aged 21, to be re-united with his father. She appeared to him in a number of guises, including the human form of Mentor. After Odysseus' reunion with his son, king and prince repelled the usurpers and regained control of Ithaca. Let us see how some of the modern literature presents this myth before contrasting them with Homer's own account.

Some articles on mentoring focus on the figure of Mentor himself (e.g. Anderson & Lucasse Shannon, 1995; Haensley & Parsons, 1993; Merriam, 1983; Tickle, 1993). He is referred to as a wise and kindly elder, a surrogate parent, a trusted adviser, an educator and guide. His role is described variously as nurturing, supporting, protecting, role modelling, and possessing a visionary perception of his ward's true potential. This is seen as demanding integrity, personal investment, and the development of a relationship with the young man based on deep mutual affection and respect. Others identify that it is not Mentor himself, but the goddess Athene, albeit at times in the guise of Mentor, who represents the key figure in the mentoring activity described by Homer (e.g. Ford, 1999b; Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995; Roberts, 1998; Shea, 1992; Stammers, 1992; Wiggans, 1998). As befitting a deity, most of these accounts focus on her 'specialness' and her inspirational character. This division between masculine and feminine images of the mentor may reflect

interpretations of mentoring which focus on the division between career-related and psycho-social roles (Kram, 1985), or instrumental and expressive traits of the mentor (Roberts, 1998).

The most significant of these works for career guidance perspectives is Ford's (1999b) report of the ICG's MAP project, which locates mentoring firmly within guidance practice, and represents one of the most substantial works on the mentoring of socially excluded young people in the UK to date. Let us consider the particular imagery that it highlights, briefly indicating some of the issues for career guidance mentoring to be explored in the rest of this paper.

Ford's work (1999a, 1999b, 1999c) has done much to challenge aspects of new government policies to expand the use of mentoring, in particular their narrow focus on employment-related goals for socially excluded young people. He has also highlighted the support that professionals need when engaging in intensive work with that client group. However, his report on the MAP (Ford, 1999b) is of interest here because Homer's myth is central to its preface. This introduction claims to clarify the terminology used, but in fact goes much further in evoking the whole ethos of professional mentoring he wishes to convey:

‘It is illuminating to return to the original source of the word “mentor”, and to discern at least some of the characteristics of behaviour which lent force to the term entering the English language in order to describe *a particular quality of caring relationship*’ (Ford, 1999b, p.9, emphasis added).

In a powerfully rhetorical and emotive account of mentoring in the *Odyssey*, Ford correctly identifies the goddess Athene and her work to reunite Telemachus with his father, rather than the actions of Mentor himself, as the central elements of the myth. He associates her image with that of the ideal mentor. But he is highly selective in the mentoring activities he chooses to portray. These focus on Athene's role in encouraging Telemachus, building his morale, inspiring him to adult independence, and illuminating his way as, together with his father, she leads him to overthrow the usurpers. Ford also selects, or ascribes, particular qualities displayed by Athene – her ‘high standards of professional practice’ (p.9), her willing voluntarism, and her evidence of possessing the necessary skills.

This version of the myth is further characterised by the surrounding material throughout the preface. Ford warns against the debasement of words and the ‘devaluation of meaning’ (p.8) in specialist jargon. He repeatedly emphasises the notion, central to his representation of mentoring, of ‘selfless caring...genuinely client-centred care’ (p.8), ‘in-depth care’ (p.10), ‘caring for each individual client, which was warm, dispassionate, spontaneous and non-judgemental, and with a readiness to go that ‘additional mile’ beyond the call of duty’ (p.13). ‘Holism’ (a term used to denote the adoption of a holistic approach) is advocated strongly. This culminates in the presentation of another concept related to Ancient Greek culture, that of *agape*, ‘“love” (in terms of selfless giving) [which] denotes the selfless love which we now associate...with the genuine professional’ (p.14). This notion of *agape* is also associated, implicitly and explicitly, with a Christian religious imagery and vocabulary which evoke the Holy Trinity rather than Greek divinity, holiness rather than ‘holism’. Athene lights the way for Telemachus (like Christ), instils him with courage and resolve (like the Holy Spirit), and displays a quasi-parental love for him (like God the Father). Yet there appears to be a tension here between this overtly

male triptych, and the emphasis on stereotypical feminine qualities of self-sacrifice and caring. This account, at least in part, seeks to influence career guidance mentors' own professional identities, and it is this influence which requires some scrutiny as those roles undergo transformation through the introduction of PA roles, the development of the Learning Gateway, and the move towards Connexions.

Ford's definition of mentoring also draws heavily on, and is clearly referenced to, that of Shea (1992), who focuses on the *specialness* of the mentor, their 'actions and work [to] help others achieve their potential' (cover notes), and, again, 'going above and beyond' the already existing work role (p.21). Shea therefore raises similar implications about the additional burden of work that mentoring may imply for the mentor. However, his version also draws on the Homeric myth to focus upon the mentee, the boy-character Telemachus, portraying the root of the parable as Telemachus' quest for his father in the transition to adulthood. This is directly associated with the role of modern mentors, and with the concept of 'human growth'. I would argue that this assumes a linear and singular view of youth transitions, which is strongly propagated in *Bridging The Gap* (SEU, 1999), particularly its assumption that the Connexions service will see all young people re-integrated into formal education, training and employment by the age of 19. Such an unproblematic approach may no longer be tenable within guidance or mentoring interventions, given new understandings of the fragmented nature of transitions to adulthood, and the dislocation of youth identities today (Ferguson *et al.*, 2000; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). Models of guidance and mentoring which ignore these new conditions may result in over-expectations about outcomes, and leave practitioners feeling not only frustration with their clients, but also a sense of failure in themselves. Labour's policy-makers have already shown themselves swift to point the finger of blame at professionals who cannot deliver desired targets in education or the health service.

This modern version of the Homeric myth thus presents powerful images of mentors as saintly and self-sacrificing on the one hand, and on the other as almost super-human in their power to transform their mentees. Yet a deeper analysis of Homer's text will reveal that these modern renditions are in fact substantial re-writings of the original story, which tells a very different tale. I offer here a brief a righting of the re-writings.

Mentoring according to Homer

As the action of the *Odyssey* (Butcher & Lang, 1890 [2]) opens, the royal household of Ithaca is in utter disarray. The wealth of Odysseus has been plundered by a band of young nobles who aspire to usurp his throne by forcing his wife Penelope to accept that her husband must be dead, and that she must re-marry. Telemachus, whom these suitors harass and mock mercilessly, appears to be severely depressed, plagued with 'anguish and lamentation' (p.9). He is unable to make decisions or to separate from his mother, and unable to make the transition to adulthood. He suffers a crisis of self-doubt, which leads him to question his own parentage and identity, and to see himself as a helpless victim.

It is only following a detailed exposition of this disastrous scenario that Homer introduces the character Mentor: 'He it was to whom Odysseus...had given the charge over all his house, that it should obey the old man, and that he should keep all things safe' (p.23). The irony is clear. It is Mentor who has presided over this havoc. Homer portrays him as an old fool and a public laughing stock. He does not mentor

Telemachus in any meaningful way at all (Roberts, 1998). This is a far cry from the sage and kindly adviser we have seen in some modern renditions.

The goddess Athene has to take on the mentoring role. She does indeed at times inform, advise and encourage Telemachus, raises his self-esteem, behaves as a role model, advocates and acts on his behalf, and urges him to develop autonomy, functions which some have identified as the heart of mentoring activities (Alleman, 1986; Ford, 1999b; Phillips-Jones, 1982). Yet these activities are incidental to the major role that she plays in Telemachus' transition. It is important to recognise that Athene undertakes her mentoring of Telemachus *as part of her sponsorship of his father*. Having won the gods' agreement that Odysseus should now be allowed to return home, she leaves the task of guiding him to another deity, and turns her own attention to rectifying the inadequacies of his son. One of her first acts is to inspire Telemachus to convene and address the Ithacan assembly. While he fails to implement much of Athene's advice, he does predict, under her influence, that *unless Odysseus is restored to the throne, the demise of the kingdom cannot be reversed*, even if his mother does remarry to one of the island's noblest youths. Why is this?

A marxist feminist anthropology of Greek mythology argues that it reflects the turbulence of the struggle of patriarchal forms of society to defeat the earlier matriarchy: 'In patriarchal terms, a man without a son is not fully a man, and to die sonless is to suffer the annihilation of the line' (Reed, 1975, p.451). Applying this perspective to the *Odyssey*, we can suggest that unless Odysseus has a worthy son and heir, he cannot be a worthy king, and his kingdom will be destroyed. Worst of all, Penelope's re-marriage threatens to re-establish the matri-lineage by disinheriting Telemachus. The stakes involved in his successful mentoring relate to the survival of the state on a vital cusp of the social order, at the very point where, historically, gender relations and political power became intertwined.

It is, however, the dénouement of the Homeric myth that stands in starkest contrast to modern re-writings. The outcome of mentoring in the *Odyssey* is not the fairy-tale 'happy-ever-after' ending that these imply. We do indeed see Telemachus, throughout his reunion with and gradual recognition of his father, grow in self-confidence and stature. But his birthright is restored in a long and bloody battle in which he and his father slay their enemies. This victory is not the final scene of the epic, however. Using his new-found resolve, Telemachus initiates further assertions of his power. Despite the pleas of his mother, he summons the women servants of the household, identified as having consorted with the suitors. He forces them to carry out the dead and to clean the hall of the blood and soil from the battle, after which he executes them. He rejects Odysseus' plea to kill them cleanly by the sword, and in an horrific scene, hangs them all, with implications of sexual domination (Southworth, personal communication, 17 May 1999): 'about all their necks nooses were cast, that they might die by the most pitiful death. And they writhed their feet for a little space, but for no long while' (Butcher & Lang, 1890, p.374). In the final event of the epic, Athene has to intervene to restrain Odysseus and Telemachus in a last battle with the suitors' avengers, lest their bloodthirsty killing incur the wrath of other gods, and thus jeopardise their reconquest of the kingdom or the remaining wealth of the household.

Mentoring in the *Odyssey*, then, is a tale of the powerful mentoring the powerful. Its outcome is political, economic and sexual domination, and the preservation of a particular social order. This raises a number of questions worthy of consideration in the current context, as mentoring enters the gamut of guidance practice. Why should current accounts of mentoring wish to refer to an Ancient Greek myth? If they are not based upon the *Odyssey*, what do these accounts draw

upon? Are we witnessing the creation of a modern myth of mentoring, and if so, what are the implications for practice?

The power of myths

The literature on mentoring young people indicates a clear distinction between natural mentoring relationships which resilient youngsters seek out and construct to meet their own needs (Rhodes *et al.*, 1992; Werner & Smith, 1982), and artificial mentoring relationships operationalised through projects and schemes such as MAP. Almond (1991) notes the tendency to express looser human bonds in terms of those which are more enduring. We see this tendency to deny the artificial character of certain types of mentoring reflected in Ford's (1999b) preface in its language of parenting and its religious imagery (although the relationship between Careers Adviser and client is fundamentally contractual), as well as in the name of the massive US mentoring programme *Big Brothers Big Sisters* (Freedman, 1995).

This habitual commutation connects with the argument (Hughes & Gold, 1999) that there is a strong tendency for artificial mentoring dyads both to draw on and to generate myths. Myths may be 'educational', in that they support learning through their inspirational quality and provide ontological validation of our individual experience. However, they may also be 'deterrent' if they inhibit learning through imposing 'a collective heritage against which we judge, interpret and perceive the present as powerful cognitive reconstructions of the past' (Hughes & Gold, 1999, p.6). The acceptance of myths as defining our practice can in fact obscure alternative explanations of experience which might engender different models of practice.

Structural linguistic theory can take this analysis a step further. It sees myth as essentially depoliticised and depoliticising, as a 'general metalanguage which is trained to *celebrate* things, and no longer to "*act them*"' (Barthes, 1972, p.144). In this way, myth not only simplifies and essentialises our experience, but also makes the contingent (and often the expedient) appear eternal and immutable. In transforming the merely historical into the natural, it serves a specific ideological function, which seeks to recruit universal agreement for ideas which covertly serve the interests of a dominant minority.

Samuel (1999) warns of the 'idolatry of origins' in seeking to explain modern phenomena through reference to myths. Conkey (1991) sees the search for ancient origins as a kind of 'seduction'. Her critique of similar trends in archaeology, from a feminist critical perspective, argues that the greater antiquity we ascribe to an 'essential' feature of human nature or society, the more 'natural' and 'given' it appears, and the more continuity and tenacity it gains. This is graphically illustrated in the title of Stammers' article, *The Greeks had a word for it...(five millennia of mentoring)* (1992), with its highly mystical portrayal of Athene's mentoring, in the actual context of the political drive to make school-based mentoring central to all phases of teacher training with DES Circular 9/92.

The desire to narrate mentorship in this mythical way, as an essential feature of our culture, becomes a 'homogenizing gaze' which constructs society as an indivisible whole, dissolves inequalities and renders social relations invisible (Conkey, 1991). Modern reconstructions of mentoring can thus be seen as *simulacra*, 'identical cop[ies] for which no original has ever existed' (Jameson, 1984, p.68). It risks becoming not just an *idée fixe*, but a Flaubertian *idée reçue*: a codified response to the world which is artificial and socially determined, a group of signs which substitute themselves for reality (Culler, 1974), and which suppress our imaginings about *how things might be* by implying they were ever thus. The present is

‘presented’ as filtered down through the past – yet this ‘past’ is itself a social construction filtered through the prism of the specific socio-historical context of the present. The past becomes the past(iche) of a ‘prequel’. The multiple and multi-coloured threads of human experience become reduced to a single white beam illuminating a singular, present ‘truth’.

In relation to mentoring, Standing (1999), from a feminist perspective, examines the role of the Homeric myth in this way:

‘The social applicability of a concept of mentoring originating from a mythical relationship between two privileged men is open to question. This may reflect patriarchal relations where power is vested in men and perpetuated in future generations through mentoring ... by appearing as a man to influence another man, Athena ensures the central roles remain male. Hence mentoring can be regarded as a process through which a dominant ideology is communicated’ (Standing, 1999, p.5).

Her critique, like those of Cochran-Smith & Paris (1995), DeMarco (1995) and Gulam & Zulfikar (1998), centres importantly on issues of social control and hierarchical relationships in mentoring, which are cloaked by a myth evoking nurture. But as we have seen, this myth of kindly nurture is itself a modern creation, contrasting starkly with the brutal outcomes of Homer’s *Odyssey*. These critical analyses, insightful as they are, still fail to answer important questions about the operation of power upon career guidance mentors who are oppressed both as women and as workers in a public service. What images of mentors are being promoted by those who re-write the Homeric myth? How do they contrast with images of mentoring suggested by the righting of those re-writings, by a more emic reading of the myth? What light does this shed on the tensions and contradictions inherent in the mentoring of young people that is now such a popular strategy for the UK government?

The stakes in mentoring today

Within the current discourse of learning, which articulates with policies to address social exclusion (e.g. DfEE, 1998b; SEU, 1999) we also see the successful transition of young people to adulthood, and their attainment of defined status within the workforce, as inextricably linked up with the fate of the nation-state, and crucial to its positioning within a new world order of globalisation and competitiveness (Colley, 2000c) – high stakes indeed. The introduction to this paper considered concerns for social justice when socially excluded young people are constructed as the objects of mentoring, and Connexions mentors are expected to ‘boost educational standards, ease social problems and even reduce crime’ (Prescott & Black, 2000).

However, this paper also aims to examine the implications for those who do the mentoring. If mythical images are being used today to promote and legitimate certain constructions of mentoring, and if, as in Ancient Greece, this is done in the interests of preserving a particular social order, how might that *status quo* be defined in our age? Combining feminist and class perspectives might lead to a different critique of the discourse of mentoring, as it impacts upon the mentors. A socialist feminist perspective would situate all human relationships within the context of capitalist social relations, which has moved on from the oligarchic slave society of Homer’s time. These social relations are defined by differential relations to

production, and by relations of power connected with class, gender, race, and disability among other factors.

As has been argued in relation to teachers, the work of guidance practitioners situates us as workers within the framework of capitalist labour processes (cf. Ozga, 1988). We do not produce manufactured goods. We appear to produce a personal service in the form of careers education and guidance. However, we have already noted the way in which mentoring for socially excluded young people, including career guidance mentoring, emphasises its role in transforming their attitudes, values and beliefs in line with employer expectations and policy makers' employment-related targets. In this sense, it could be argued that we do indeed produce a very special kind of commodity – the labour power of others (cf. Rikowski, 1999). In this sense, the role of the PA can be seen as labouring to produce transformed dispositions in young people, which enables them to compete in the labour market, to be more productive themselves once they enter it, and to function as effective human capital (cf. Gaskell, 1992).

One genderised aspect of this labour process relates to the selfless love (*agape*) for and caring commitment to the client promoted by modern representations of Athene-as-Mentor. It is not only young people, but also their mentors who have to display the requisite personal attitudes and characteristics for this work – a point much emphasised in the MAP report (Ford, 1999b). In career guidance mentoring, as in teaching (Nias, 1988), where commitment to the client is made central to the professional role, the worker sells her personality as an integral part of her own labour power. It takes the form of *emotional* labour, and this emotion work brings its own costs, and does so disproportionately for women than for men, given women's lower social status (Hochschild, 1983). The portrayal of Athene displaying both 'in-depth care' (Ford, 1999b, p.10) and 'high standards of professional practice' and skills (Ford, 1999b, p.9), being both 'warm' and 'dispassionate' (Ford, 1999b, p.13), produces expectations that the mentor will act out simultaneously the 'two leading roles of Womanhood' (Hochschild, 1983, p.175): maternal caring for the needs of others, and professional distance and control. Both combine in emotional work to absorb and neutralise the feelings expressed by clients, and to repress natural but socially and professionally unacceptable responses in ourselves. Walkerdine (1992) has issued a strong challenge to the progressivist notion that 'love will win the day' (p.16) in her Foucauldian analysis of primary teaching which could equally well be applied to guidance mentors 'helping to free...young people from disaffection' (Ford, 1999b, p.10), as they:

'...become caught, trapped inside a concept of nurturance which held them responsible for the freeing of each...individual, and therefore for the management of an idealist dream, an impossible fiction' (Walkerdine, 1992, p.16).

How does this play itself out in the work of PAs? I draw here not only the literature, but also on my own experiences of working as a guidance practitioner in inner-city schools, and with socially excluded young adults on a New Deal training programme, as well as responses by guidance staff in a series of workshops on disaffection and mentoring that I have facilitated for a number of careers services in the last year. It is tough trying to build rapport and relationships with young people who mistrust adults in general, and those they perceive in authority in particular. One can become frustrated and even angry with clients, when one has made every effort to

help them devise and take ownership of the most basic, small-stepped action plan, or what we hope will be a confidence-building CV – and none of the steps are taken, or the CV is lost or left unused. But this frustration and anger must not be allowed to show, and we do hard emotional labour to suppress them and to rationalise their cause as our failure, not the clients’ – for it is, of course, a failure we tend to take upon ourselves (Merton & Parrott, 1999). We work with needy clients, and have to invoke our dispassionate side to manage boundaries, yet feel disappointment, concern and loss when, having thought we had begun to engage them in the guidance process, they draw away and disappear. We work with defensive and aggressive clients, and some times all our empathy and non-judgmentalism seems to no avail in breaking through those barriers.

The other main aspect of the image of Athene-as-Mentor – ‘a readiness to go that “additional mile” beyond the call of duty’ (Ford, 1999b, p.13) – combines with this emotion work. What might that ‘additional mile’ mean? Perhaps an expectation that PAs will carry out many more home visits, although car user allowances may not be paid, and safety measures enjoyed by social workers and others may not be in place. Perhaps the notion that ‘each teenager will be given the mobile phone number of their assigned [Connexions] mentor and told to contact him or her at any time with any problem’ (Prescott & Black, 2000). Or maybe the simple expectation that we will pack more into a day’s work, or stay that bit later at the careers office to complete our administrative tasks, because the rest of the day has been spent getting clients out of bed, taking them to appointments, meeting with their other key workers, advocating on their behalf with opportunity providers, listening to their problems and patiently guiding them to do even the simplest tasks for themselves.

If the original myth of Mentor was a tale of powerful mentoring the powerful, the indications within career guidance are that we may be seeing a trend towards the weak mentoring the weak. In response to the recent careers service agenda of refocusing on the disaffected, and the introduction of the Learning Gateway, on-going mentoring-type relationships are being created by the allocation of PAs to young people disengaged from mainstream learning opportunities, or at risk of so becoming. Such support has been shown to be highly resource-intensive, requiring at least three to four times as much as input mainstream clients (DfEE, 1997; Ford, 1999a), yet careers service budgets had only a 7% allocation to meet their refocusing targets (ICG, 1999). Despite having no control over the level and quality of service, practitioners may internalise feelings of responsibility and guilt for under-funded and inadequate provision (Nicol, 1999). One effect appears to be increasing levels of stress-related ill-health and disruption of professional identities among Careers Advisers (CAs) (Hulbert, 2000). Moreover, increasing numbers of PAs are staff who have not been given the opportunity to obtain the professional-level qualifications required for CAs in statutory services (GHK Economics and Management, 2000). While they may hold or be working towards NVQ Level 3 in Advice and Guidance, an associate professional/technical level qualification, this is very different from the traditional postgraduate-level education for CAs, which can provide a basis for critical analysis of issues such as the impact of social inequality on the school-to-work transitions [3]. (This is not to decry in any way the level of *professionalism* or commitment that such support staff bring to their work, nor the importance of their qualifications or other forms of work-based continuous professional development they undertake.)

Of the feminist authors we have considered, who argue for nurture rather than control on the part of mentors, only Standing (1999) touches briefly upon this aspect

of power relations within mentoring dyads, acknowledging the often unrecognised burden that falls upon the mentor in addition to her normal duties (1999, p.15). However, the portrayal of mentoring dyads as feminine, nurturing relationships is, as we have seen, at the heart of mythical representations of career guidance mentors. The opposite result may therefore be achieved: that in denying the operation of power over *both* members of mentoring dyads, the powerlessness of the mentor is also denied (cf. Walkerdine, 1992). Through an ideal of progress towards ‘rational’, employer-defined attitudes, values and behaviour, modern myths displace structural inequalities and the intense personal stresses they create. Within this maternal dyad, the mentor bears a cost as she tries to create the ‘ideal’ young person out of the ‘disaffected’ young person, presenting an idealised version of herself as the embodiment of normative behaviour – the role model. (This is not to argue that such effects are confined exclusively to women within these professions, since men in these roles will also be susceptible to the discursive pressures here described. However, the predominance of women in certain professions, including careers guidance, makes it easier for ideological definitions of those roles to be insinuated.) In this respect, career guidance mentoring may be defined not so much by particular *functions*, as by *emotional commitment* and the reconstruction of professional *identity* as exemplified in the portrayal of Athene in the Preface to the MAP Report (Ford, 1999b).

Another way of understanding these pressures is through the distinction between *feminine* and *feminist* ethics of care, which may be apposite in rethinking Ford’s (1999b) perspective of *agape*:

‘Care as a feminine ethic is an ethic of *special obligations and interpersonal relationships*. *Selflessness or self-sacrifice* is built into the very definition of care when caring is premised on an opposition between relationships and self-development. A feminine ethic of care is an ethic of the relational world as that world appears within a patriarchal social order: that is, as a world apart, separated politically and psychologically from a realm of individual autonomy and freedom which is the realm of justice and contractual obligation’ (Gilligan, 1995, p.122, emphasis added).

Gilligan (1995) argues that such selflessness in fact represents *disconnection from* rather than connection with others. It inhibits the capacity to form healthy relationships. The human costs of emotional labour to the guidance worker may be burnout and impoverishment of personal and social life for those who devote themselves with the greatest commitment, guilt for those who adopt a more self-protective stance, or cynicism for those who consciously, but dispassionately, act out the role required (cf. Hochschild, 1983; Nias, 1988). At the same, it may undermine the authenticity that is one of the core conditions of vocational guidance and counselling (Egan, 1994; Rogers, 1961), and impede building the warm relationships with clients that is the key aspiration of mentoring. A *feminist* notion of care would have to be framed within a more collective approach.

Freedman (1993) reflects exactly this challenge in relation to mentoring, when he counterposes to the current fad for individualised and artificial mentoring interventions the notion of building communities’ capacity to become ‘mentor-rich’ with adults that young people can access on their own terms. In this regard, some ethnic community-based models of mentoring may be more appropriate, where the

emphasis is not on a process of transforming the young person to 'fit' the existing *status quo* (Merton & Parrott, 1999) through the intervention of the mentor, but on advocacy which seeks to challenge the institutional barriers that cause many young people to feel unwelcomed and excluded (Gulam & Zulfiqar, 1998; Forbes, 2000). Admittedly, this would be much longer term, lower-profile, and therefore less populist than the current policy approach.

Conclusion

Portrayals of mentoring through re-writings of the Homeric are legitimating a particular version of its practice, creating a discourse which acts as a 'régime of truth' (Foucault, 1980, p.131) that brooks no opposition. This paper has shown how even critical perspectives have had to express themselves within that discourse, and argues that more caution needs to be used in drawing on mythical representations of the mentor role. In order to resist this régime of truth, rather than seeking alternative, but still romanticised, versions of ourselves as Athene, or as collaborators with Athene (DeMarco, 1993), at least two aspects of career guidance mentoring need to be considered carefully in the development of PA roles and the Connexions service. The first of these relates to the way in which the identities of socially excluded young people are socially constructed as malleable to the demands of employers. PAs need not only skills training, but also educational opportunities to reflect critically upon issues such as social inequality, cultural difference, and alternative approaches to understanding social exclusion; as well as opportunities to engage in collective reflective practice with their colleagues (cf. Issitt, 2000). Such opportunities might render them better able to resist the pressures of expected outcomes which may be highly desirable for politicians, but may be neither achievable nor desirable for clients.

The second relates to constructions of the professional identities of PAs themselves, and the infrastructure that needs to be in place to support them. There should be a recognition that the intensity of targeted caseload work cannot rely on the goodwill of guidance workers towards their clients to extend both the hours they work, and the emotional commitment they bring to that work. Instead, it requires the devotion of resources to practitioner support, particularly given early evidence of the toll this work is already taking (Hulbert, 2000). If it is the quality of the mentoring relationship that is paramount in successful outcomes (Ford, 1999b), images of mentors as saintly and self-sacrificing may in fact work against their ability to connect with young clients presenting social and emotional difficulties. In buying into romantically rewritten myths of Athene's role as mentor, we run the risk of undermining the very important evidence that has been generated through the MAP (Ford, 1999b) about the need to resist over-expectations of what mentoring can achieve with socially excluded young people, and about the level of support that practitioners require in carrying out this work.

Rather than attempting utopian feminist re-framings of the mentoring process which remain within this mythic discourse, more evidence is needed about the workings of mentoring dyads, through research which explores the personal constructs, institutional pressures and structural constraints which impact upon the process and its outcomes. Research might address PAs beliefs about social exclusion and youth, and the way these beliefs influence mentoring (Ford, personal communication, 17 December 2000; see also Colley, 2000d). It might usefully explore ways in which young people themselves exercise agency within mentoring relationships, or resist assumed processes and outcomes, and how PAs respond.

Ways in which PAs express or suppress their own beliefs about social, economic and political issues within guidance mentoring relationships might provide useful insights into the more hidden operation of power upon the mentor role. A wider area of research, suggested by the challenge to individualised and artificial mentoring interventions, might be to investigate the possibility of building communities' capacity to become 'mentor-rich'. In addition, perhaps the guidance community needs to look back to previous debates at key turning points of the profession, when more collective approaches to working with disadvantaged young people were on the agenda (e.g. Bates *et al.*, 1984; Watts, 1983; Willis, 1977). Beyond today's fervour for mentoring there still lies the possibility that current approaches may represent neither the best use of resources, nor the most empowering or democratic way of helping socially excluded youth.

Such research, which goes beyond the likely remit of DfEE-funded evaluations (DfEE, 2000b), is vital as guidance services move towards the implementation of the proposals for Connexions, heralding the creation of a new profession of mentors. These proposals will impact dramatically upon the existing professional identities of careers service staff, and may lead them to internalise in profound, complex and potentially damaging ways the responsibility for solving their clients' social exclusion. We need to remain open to the possibility of questioning the validity of mentoring as an individualised response to problems that may rightly have more collective or structural solutions.

Notes

1. Searches were carried out on ASSIA Plus, BIDS ISI Social Sciences Index, British Education Index and ERIC databases
2. All references to Homer's *Odyssey* are to this text. This translation is used, despite its rather archaic literary style, because of its attempt to convey the original with the greatest possible degree of historical accuracy, rather than more poetic or vernacular translations which often lead to radical misinterpretations of the content (Butcher & Lang, 1890, p.vii-viii).
3. Careers Advisers in the UK must hold the professional qualifications of either the postgraduate Diploma in Careers Guidance Parts I and II, or NVQ Level 4 in Advice and Guidance. Careers services also employ careers and/or employment assistants in support roles with client contact, traditionally for a more limited remit focused on placing activities, and on referral to a CA for in-depth guidance, or to other sources of help. Such support staff are not required to hold a qualification, but many careers services are supporting them to undertake NVQ Level 3 in Advice and Guidance. In attempting to gather hard evidence about this trend towards placing careers and employment assistants in PA roles, to support the evidence of my own experience, I contacted three careers services with which I have worked on issues of refocusing over the last two years. (I shall maintain confidentiality here due to the sensitivity which surrounds such issues at present.) I asked them if they would quantify numbers of qualified Careers Advisers and of support staff in PA roles. One service failed to reply, and one confirmed that their PAs include a mix of staff at both levels. The third informed me that my request for information had 'offended' their Chief Executive, as he saw the distinction between 'professional' and other levels of staff as 'fundamentally flawed' and 'arbitrary'. Nonetheless, standard occupational categories make a clear distinction between 'professional' and 'associate professional/technical' occupations, based among other factors on levels of qualification and degree of responsibility and

autonomy in work roles. In addition, careers services, including this latter one, also make a distinction between qualified CAs and support staff in their levels of pay and responsibility, a distinction which managers would presumably not see as 'fundamentally flawed' or 'arbitrary'.

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