

Reflections on a Meaningful Mentoring Relationship

Edward J. Peacock

Author Note

Address all correspondence to Edward Peacock, 1166 Peacock Rd, Selwyn, ON Canada

K9J 6X5. Contact: ejpeacock@gmail.com

Reflections on a meaningful mentoring relationship

I had the privilege of being an apprentice to a master teacher and researcher—Dr. Paul Wong. My relationship with Paul started after I had completed a master’s degree and decided that I did not want to return to graduate school for a doctorate. I started to work with Paul at Trent University essentially as a research assistant and teaching assistant. The relationship deepened as I assisted him over the next several years, then later as he supervised my Ph.D. work, and as we continued to collaborate on several projects after I completed my doctorate. Many of the important things I learned in psychology I learned through an extended period of “doing psychology” with this brilliant psychologist.

In this brief tribute, I focus on only one small portion of Paul’s distinguished career, the approximately 12 years beginning in the early 1980s during which I worked closely with him. It was a time of transition for me, but also for Paul. At the beginning of this period, Paul was continuing his animal research program at the same time as he was exploring several avenues of human research. He had made what was already recognized as an important contribution to the literature on human attributions (Wong & Weiner, 1981). By the end of this period, Paul was no longer doing animal research. He had a thriving research program investigating a number of aspects of human behavior and I had completed the doctorate that I previously thought I would never pursue.

Personally, I gained immeasurably as a result of being mentored by Paul. His encouragement and generosity had a profound impact on me. I am certain that I would not have returned to graduate school to complete a doctorate if it had not been for Paul’s ongoing encouragement of me to do so. He saw I had potential, convinced me that a doctorate would be a worthwhile endeavour for me to pursue and provided support throughout. Also, he was generous

in providing opportunities for authorship and professional development. Although Paul was always kind-hearted, he was also very forthright, never mincing words. I always knew exactly what Paul thought about my work.

I learned to be a better writer because of Paul. He invested time and effort into providing much helpful feedback on my writing. I tended to write long convoluted sentences. Paul suffered through reading numerous drafts laden with such sentences. He explained to me the problems and offered helpful suggestions of how I could improve my writing. I recall him modestly saying that he was not a fancy writer so he tried to write simply and clearly, telling a straightforward story. He suggested I do likewise. After numerous repetitions of this sequence, there was some improvement in my writing. Later in my career, this was a process that I attempted to follow when editing the work of others.

I also observed Paul's generosity in his interactions with his undergraduate students. At a small university with a limited collection of psychology journals and at a time before papers were available electronically, getting quick and easy access to journal articles was a challenge. Therefore, it was essential to have hard-copy reprints of articles. Paul had a library of thousands of such reprints, including the most recent ones in all the areas that interested him. He generously allowed students who were doing course assignments for him to borrow reprints. Many times, these were not returned. Yet Paul continued to give his students access to his reprint library. This is just one of many examples of the way he actively supported his students and helped them to be able to do their best.

I learned from Paul to pay careful attention to three basic aspects fundamental to good psychological research. First, he emphasized the importance of conceptual clarity. There is a need for clear thinking to ensure the concepts being investigated are defined precisely and are

distinct from other concepts. In his research during this time, Paul's careful conceptualizations provided important clarifications and advances in several research areas, including stress and coping (Wong & Reker, 1986), reminiscence (Wong, 1995a), and aging (Wong, 1989). He also demonstrated the importance of clearly identifying the dimensions of constructs under study, developing helpful taxonomies in the classification of reminiscence (Watt & Wong, 1991) and jealousy (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Second, I learned that measurement matters. The choice of measurement tools for a study has a critical impact on the usefulness of the findings. To ensure meaningful findings, reliable and valid multidimensional measures are needed that are able to assess the specific dimensions that have been hypothesized or previously identified.

Consequently, Paul and his associates developed multidimensional measures of death attitudes (Wong et al., 1994), cognitive appraisal (Peacock & Wong, 1991), jealousy (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) and reminiscence (Watt & Wong, 1991) that helped to advance research in each area.

Third, I learned the importance of good theories and models for advancing research. Paul's models of frustrative stress (Wong, 1995b), adaptive coping (Wong, 1993), and reminiscence (Wong, 1995a) all made significant contributions. These models not only made sense of disparate findings and views, but also provided innovative perspectives that stimulated further research.

Paul's mission has always been to make a positive difference in people's lives. I had the opportunity to participate with him as he did this with a group of seniors. He had been researching reminiscence in the elderly and had identified how the process of reminiscence could have positive effects for older individuals (Wong 1995a; Wong & Watt, 1991). So, at his home over a number of weeks, he offered a group of seniors a process of guided life review. Each week, Paul gave a brief talk about issues to consider in reviewing one's life then the larger group

divided into two smaller groups for discussion; Paul led one of the small groups and I led the other. I was amazed at how valuable these elderly people found this process. They were very appreciative for the opportunity to reconcile problematic issues and discover new meaning in their lives. Interestingly, the format used for these sessions appears similar to the approach he and his wife, Dr. Lilian Wong, have taken in their highly regarded Meaningful Living Meetups (Wong, 2012).

Paul experienced a number of professional frustrations and disappointments during these years. Some of these were the topics of lively discussions with me. From those conversations, I learned something of the darker side of psychology. These too were important lessons on the realities of a career in psychology. One of the issues that was prominent in our discussions was the inherent unfairness of the peer-review publication process. In the 1980s, Paul had some manuscripts rejected for publication for unjustifiable reasons. He refuted the criticisms and advocated for changes to make the editorial process impartial (e.g., Wong, 1981). In his recent autobiography, Paul detailed how the peer-review process is biased and unfair; he concluded that his efforts to stimulate improvements in this process were largely a failure yet still worthwhile (Wong 2017). During my time with him, he was hampered by other issues as well, ones that involved politics, personalities, and pettiness. Paul remained true to his character and values, tenaciously standing his ground in dealing with these issues while doing what he could to effect change.

Overall, what stands out for me about my years working with Paul was that it was a very intellectually stimulating and meaningful time. Paul's ability to generate seemingly endless innovative ideas coupled with his passion, determination, and work ethic were very inspiring. As well, his incisive analytical and critical thinking skills ensured that his work was outstanding.

Many of his publications from this period continue to get numerous citations each year and are among his top cited work. Although Paul made important contributions to diverse areas of psychology in the 1980s and early 1990s, by the mid-1990s his research and writing was focused on personal meaning. In the years since, Paul has become a leading theorist and researcher on personal meaning. Arguably, it is his work situating a meaning-centered approach to research and therapy within a broad framework of positive psychology that is his most significant contribution to psychology.

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