Chapter 3

Mentoring with(in) care:
A co-constructed auto-ethnography of mutual learning

Dyadic level of learning

This chapter is the accepted version of the following article:

Abstract

Research into workplace mentoring is principally focussed on predictors and psychosocial and instrumental outcomes, while there is scarcely any in-depth research into relational characteristics, outcomes and processes. This article aims to illustrate these relational aspects. It reports a co-constructed auto-ethnography of a dyadic mentoring relationship as experienced by mentor and protégé.

The co-constructed narrative illustrates that attentiveness towards each other and a caring attitude, alongside learning-focussed values, promote a high-quality mentoring relationship. This relationship is characterised, among other things, by person-centredness, care, trust and mutual influence, thereby offering a situation in which mutual learning and growth can occur. Learning develops through and in relation and is enhanced when both planned and unplanned learning takes place. In addition, the narrative makes clear that learning and growth of both those involved is intertwined and interdependent and that mutual learning and growth enriches and strengthens the relationship.

It is concluded that the narrative illustrates a number of complex relational processes that are difficult to elucidate in quantitative studies and theoretical constructs. It offers deeper insight into the initiation and improvement of high-quality mentoring relationships and emphasises the importance of further research into relational processes in mentoring relationships.
Introduction

There is increasing consensus that learning and professional development should take place as much as possible within the workplace and in interaction, partly because this accords with the complexity of organisations and encourages the transfer of knowledge to the everyday work situation (Carmeli, Brueller & Dutton, 2009; Eraut, 2004; Snoeren, Janssen, Niessen & Abma, 2014). In line with this insight, mentoring in organisations has become increasingly popular. There is also growing interest in workplace mentoring in the literature and, since the pioneering work of Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) and Kram (1983, 1984), the concept has frequently been described and researched.

Originally mentoring was portrayed as a long and continuously evolving relationship between a less experienced person (protégé) and someone more experienced (mentor), where the focus is on the protégé’s career and psychosocial development (Kram, 1983, 1984). The mentor can be a peer, the supervisor or someone else in or outside the organisation (Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2010; Kram, 1984), who supports the protégé in learning about the organisation and preparing for a (future) function through sponsorship, coaching, setting challenging assignments, role-modelling, counselling or friendship (Kram, 1983). Over the years the concept of mentoring has been extended, and other forms of mentoring have been described that are not limited to the original proposed long-term individual face-to-face relationship. Examples include team mentoring, e-mentoring, and network mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2010). Distinction is now also made between formal (organisationally initiated) and informal (spontaneously developed) mentoring (Chun, Sosik & Yun, 2012; Eby, Rhodes, et al., 2010).

The importance and value of mentoring has frequently been investigated. From these principally quantitative, correlational, and cross-sectional studies, usually from the perspective of either the protégé or the mentor (Allen, Eby, O’Brien & Lentz, 2008), it has emerged that the protégé, the mentor and the organisation all may benefit from mentoring. Results reported include, among other things, career development, job performance, work satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and interpersonal relations (e.g. Allen & Eby, 2003; Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004; Chun et al., 2012; Ghosh & Reio Jr, 2013; Hu, Wang, Yang & Wu, 2014; Kammeyer-Mueller & Judge, 2008; Lankau, 2002; Thurston, D’Abate & Eddy, 2012; Underhill, 2006). These effects can be influenced by various factors such as individual idiosyncrasies, experienced similarities, organisational characteristics, duration of the relationship, and the type of mentoring (e.g. Allen & Eby, 2003; Baranik, Roling & Eby, 2010; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000; Tonidandel, Avery & Phillips, 2007; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller & Marchese, 2006), but also appear to be
dependent on the quality of the relationship and satisfaction with it. Marginal and dysfunctional mentoring relationships can lead to reduction in performance and work attitude, as well as increased stress and absenteeism (Eby, Butts, Durley & Ragins, 2010; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2010), while the expected outcome of high-quality mentoring relationships is learning and personal growth and development (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins, 2010; Ragins, 2012). There seems then to be a growing awareness that the relating within mentorship is important and not just one-way. However, up until now research has mainly been limited to influential variable and instrumental outcomes.

There is little research on positive mentoring relations and relational characteristics and processes responsible for the development of effective mentoring relationships (Chandler, Kram & Yip, 2011; Chun et al., 2012; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins, 2010; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). More knowledge is needed from the relational and reciprocal perspectives (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez & Ballou, 2002; Ragins, 2010) and in particular about high-quality mentoring relationships (Ragins, 2010; Ragins & Dutton, 2007) if organisations, mentors, and protégés are to develop a broader picture of successful mentoring. Longitudinal research and intensive study of qualitative data from the mentor and protégé perspectives are required (Allen et al., 2008; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2010), and, according to Rutti, Helms, and Rose (2013), should begin with case-studies. This article aims to make such a contribution by offering a deep and emic insight into a high-quality dyadic mentoring relationship.

Firstly, a number of relational concepts and theories within mentoring literature and current insights into relational characteristics, processes, and outcomes of mentoring are discussed. Then the context and methods used in this research are explained. In order to understand the nature of the relationship and relational mentoring outcomes such as learning and growth, the experiences and insights of both mentor and protégé are presented as a co-constructed narrative (Ellis, 2004). This offers the reader the possibility of vicarious experience (Stake, 1994) and contributes to knowledge of relational processes and outcomes in mentoring relationships.

Theoretical background

In the literature on mentoring a number of theories and concepts claim to describe mentoring from a relational perspective. Until now it appears that social exchange theory, in which the leader-member exchange approach can be included, is the most frequently used (see for example: Ensher, Thomas & Murphy, 2001; Haggard, 2012; Raabe, 2003; Rutti et al., 2013). This theory has been developed outside the domain of mentoring and suggests that people are inclined to invest in and be
involved in a relationship if it delivers as much, if not more, than it costs; i.e. there is perceived reciprocity and individuals experience a balance between investment and outcome (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1958). In a mentoring relationship this implies not only that the mentor invests in protégé related outcomes, but also has personal gain in the relationship, for example, the protégé may supply critical and up-to-date information, or the relationships brings recognition and acknowledgement for the mentor (Allen, 2007).

Another theory that is presented as focusing on the relationship is the mentoring enacted theory (Kalbfleisch, 2002, 2007), which sees mentoring relationships as unique, personal relationships and elaborates on the function of communication during the initiation, development and maintenance of the mentoring relationship. It is based on a number of assumptions, such as that relationships seem to come into being by the parties involved becoming better acquainted, rather than because of a request for mentoring. Moreover, a mentoring relationship is seen as neither static nor linear, but one that changes and evolves over time and in which mentor and protégé use communicative strategies that are, among other things, dependent on earlier experiences, the perception of the situation, culture, gender and professional and emotional needs. Also, this theory states that women and protégés will invest more in communication (and therefore the relationship) than men and mentors.

Both theories offer a framework to examine relationships and the relations within them, more specifically the sort of exchange, structures and strategies in a mentoring relationship, but appear to pay less attention to emotions and affective dimensions or aspects such as relational connectedness. This is not the case in relational mentoring (Ragins, 2012), a recently formulated concept that draws on, for example, positive organisational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003) and relational cultural perspectives (Comstock et al., 2008; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). It approaches mentoring as an interdependent and high-quality work relationship that is focused on the continuously evolving needs of both those involved rather than on a particular expected return, and extends the conceptual lens of mentoring to those relational micro-processes that encourage mutual learning, growth, and development.

A high-quality mentoring relationship comes from successive episodes of strong and genuine connections and interactions between mentor and protégé that are flexible and resilient and demonstrate broad emotional capacity, mutual empathy, growth, and empowerment (Comstock et al., 2008; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). This dyadic and reciprocal relationship is based on communal norms and interdependent and generative processes, characterised by relational trust and commitment, mutual respect, shared influence and ‘fluid expertise’ (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). In addition to these principles and characteristics, Ragins (2009,
2012) also describes factors that influence relational mentoring, such as the degree to which those involved identify themselves in relation to others (mentoring identities), cognitive maps based on earlier experiences and relationships (mentoring schemas), and views of one’s self in future relationships (mentoring as possible selves). In addition relational skills, emotional stability and intelligence, similarity of values, personalities and learning orientations, and a supportive environment and organisational culture encourage relational mentoring. Among the consequences or outcomes of relational mentoring are learning and personal development, increased relational competence, inspiration, self-confidence, empowered action, and the desire for more and deeper connections, whereby supporting skills and conditions (and so the relationship) are nourished and strengthened. It is also probable that increased relational skills are transferred to other relationships and settings (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins, 2009).

This idea of interaction and reciprocal influence of various factors and elements has points of intersection with the work of Jones and Corner (2012), who see mentoring through a complex adaptive systems lens. They regard the dyadic mentoring relationship as a co-created and complex system, having a dynamic, emergent, and non-linear character. Jones and Corner (2012) go further than relational mentoring by emphasising the importance of studying the mentoring relationship within the wider context in which the relationship evolves. They explain that the mentoring relationship is not only influenced by the environment and the behaviour of the mentor and protégé, but also that the mentoring relationship influences the larger system or the broader context as well. Therefore the context forms the situation in which the relationship takes place, but at the same time is also part of the mentoring relationship.

The relational concepts and theories mentioned above have various levels of abstraction in their elaboration and explain a mentoring relationship each in its own way, and therefore interpret a relational perspective differently. Nevertheless, they all emphasise the reciprocal, dynamic and evolving character of a mentoring relationship that, at the very least, is dependent on those involved, what they are prepared to invest and their earlier experiences, their behaviour and competencies. Moreover, the theories complement each other; the social exchange theory and mentoring enactment theory for example, indicate the conditions for beginning and maintaining a mentoring relationship; relational mentoring adds affective dimensions, relational processes and outcomes like reciprocal growth and learning, while a complex adaptive systems lens encourages seeing a mentoring relationship within the larger context.

These concepts and theories, with the exception of the social exchange theory, have until now been limited to theoretical elaboration based on theories developed outside the mentoring domain and insights won from earlier, often quantitative, research into mentoring. Therefore further research is necessary. In
order to gain a more profound understanding of mentoring from a relational viewpoint, we explored a dyadic mentoring relationship and its relational processes from an insider’s perspective.

Methodology

The study presented here is a co-constructed auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2004); a method of systematic analysis of and collaborative writing about a shared experience or activity aimed at understanding both the essence of the relationship and how the researchers involved experienced the shared activity. The shared experience concerns the mentoring relationship and in particular the collaboration and reciprocal learning process of the first two authors as practice developers (PD’ers) learning to facilitate processes in a care organisation. First the mentoring context is explained, after which data collection and analysis is considered alongside a number of quality control procedures and ethical issues.

The mentoring context

Although mentoring relationships can have many forms and can occur across organisations, the mentoring relationship central to this article is a traditional dyadic relationship taking place in one organisation, namely a care facility for older people in the Netherlands. From 2007 the organisation has cooperated closely with certain schools of nursing to improve the integration of care, education, innovation and research in a care innovation unit (CIU). In a CIU staff qualified in care collaborate intensively with a large group of students with the aim of creating a challenging work environment for care practitioners and improved quality of care for residents (Snoeren & Frost, 2011). In doing so the principles of practice development (PD), defined by Manley, McCormack, and Wilson (2008) as “a continuous process of developing person-centred cultures” (p. 9) are applied. Miranda is lecturer at one of the faculties of nursing involved and was hired as a facilitator, consultant and researcher (called practice developer) for two days a week to facilitate this process of helping the team develop their own knowledge and skills in working towards a transformation of the culture and context of care. In 2009, when it was decided to create two new CIUs, a junior PD’er was appointed to each of the new units. Miranda acted as mentor for their further development as PD’ers, with the intention that as they become more proficient, she would retreat from the organisation. In this article the focus is on the mentoring relationship between Miranda and Ragna, one of the junior PD’ers.

Ragna was already employed by the organisation as a student coordinator and was appointed as junior PD’er for 0.8 full-time equivalents (FTE) by the location
manager. Ragna and Miranda had previously worked together for a number of years as student coordinators and later, when Miranda was hired in as PD’er, in the development of the first CIU. Ragna was responsible for the planning and tutoring of individual students during their internship in the original CIU. She had much experience in this field, had a nurse and teacher training, but felt insufficiently experienced to facilitate groups and change processes or conduct research. Miranda had a nursing, educational and academic background and was experienced in facilitating change processes and involving others in (action) research in both educational and care contexts.

**Initiation and structure of the mentoring relationship**

Miranda was not involved in Ragna’s appointment as junior PD’er. But although the initial match was made by the location manager, making the relationship formal in its initiation (Eby, Rhodes, et al., 2010), there were no guidelines for mentoring in place. Additionally, neither the organisation nor the manager played a role in directing or checking the nature of the roles, the aims of the relationship, details of meetings or how long the mentoring relationship should last. As a result the relationship structure evolved informally (Eby, Rhodes, et al., 2010) between Ragna and Miranda.

The mentoring relationship lasted from January 2009 until the end of July 2011. Ragna and Miranda met weekly, usually face-to-face, to discuss progress in the development of the new CIU and consider the learning process from both perspectives. Generally speaking, Ragna dealt independently with tasks that concerned the support of individual members of staff and students in their learning processes, seeking support from Miranda for the facilitation of groups, change and research processes. As such, they both participated in activities that were aimed at the improvement of the quality of care in the unit, such as preparatory meetings with practitioners and setting up a participatory action research project as an emergent and cyclical research process aimed at studying the improvement of practice with participants (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). On the unit, three action research (AR) cycles (two with the aim of improving daily activities for the older residents and one aimed at increasing family participation) were consciously utilised by Ragna and Miranda as learning opportunities to develop competency as PD’ers. In addition Ragna and Miranda took part in a unit-transcending community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998), consisting of both junior PD’ers, two nurses who worked in the CIUs, Miranda and an experienced senior PD’er from the faculty of nursing where Miranda was employed. The common goal of the CoP participants was to develop further as facilitators of guiding others in their learning, and as facilitators of change and innovation within CIUs.
See table 1 for an overview of shared activities undertaken during the dyadic mentoring relationship.

Table 1 Joint activities during mentoring relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Aim of activity</th>
<th>Facilitation roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2009 – July 2011</td>
<td>Weekly bilateral face to face meetings.</td>
<td>Ragna and Miranda</td>
<td>- Monitoring the development of the CIU.</td>
<td>Changing, not formally defined roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009 – June 2009</td>
<td>Five preparatory team meetings.</td>
<td>All practitioners (staff and students)</td>
<td>Developing a shared vision about care, learning, innovation and collaboration within the CIU.</td>
<td>Facilitated by Miranda, co-facilitation by Ragna.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009 – April 2011</td>
<td>CoP ‘learning to facilitate’: seventeen meetings.</td>
<td>Six facilitators, including Ragna and Miranda, with different levels of experience and knowledge.</td>
<td>Learning from and with each other in facilitating others in their learning.</td>
<td>Initially facilitated by Miranda, later by others (including Ragna) with varying degrees of support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2009 – July 2010</td>
<td>Action research project ‘daily activities’: seventeen meetings with research group 1.</td>
<td>AR group 1: - Ragna and Miranda - Five staff members</td>
<td>Improving daily activities for residents.</td>
<td>Facilitated by Miranda, co-facilitation by Ragna.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009 – July 2011</td>
<td>Action research project ‘family participation’: twenty meetings with research group 2.</td>
<td>AR group 2: - Ragna en Miranda - Three staff members - Two students</td>
<td>Improving the communication with and participation of residents’ family.</td>
<td>Facilitated by Ragna or other research group member, under supervision of Ragna. Decreasing support from Miranda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2010 – July 2011</td>
<td>Action research project ‘daily activities continued’: five meetings with research group 3.</td>
<td>AR group 3: - Ragna - Five staff members - Two students</td>
<td>Sustaining improvements in daily activities for residents.</td>
<td>Facilitated by Ragna, without direct support from Miranda.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and analysis

In a co-constructed auto-ethnography each participant shares their personal, incomplete and historically situated version of the shared experience, after which, in collaboration, these individual perspectives are integrated into a co-constructed narrative (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). As illustrated by others (e.g. Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012; Lapadat, 2009; Sambrook, Stewart & Roberts, 2008),
this integration is a dynamic, reflexive and dialogical process based on and contributing to the skills of the participants. In this way shared knowledge and insights and a deeper understanding of the relational experience are created (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012; Ellis et al., 2010) and outsiders are invited into the subjective world of the narrators (Ellis, 2004).

In this study the sharing of personal stories and the co-construction of a shared narrative took place, eighteen months after the mentoring relationship had ended, based on data collected during the mentoring relationship (see table 2).

Table 2 Data (stories) gathered during the mentoring relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date / period</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Aim and content of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2009 – June 2011</td>
<td>Journal of field notes on preparatory team meetings, CoP and AR projects (Miranda only)</td>
<td>Monitoring CoP and AR projects - Reflections on own facilitation role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009 – April 2011</td>
<td>Minutes and audio recordings of CoP meetings (n=17)</td>
<td>Monitoring CoP - Reflections on own learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009 – July 2011</td>
<td>Portfolios with diverse personal notes and reflections on lived experiences.</td>
<td>Monitoring own learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2009 – July 2011</td>
<td>Minutes and audio recordings of meetings with AR groups (n=42)</td>
<td>Monitoring AR projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009 – July 2011</td>
<td>Minutes and audio recordings of dyadic evaluations of meetings AR group 2 and 3 (n=21)</td>
<td>Reflections on facilitation of AR group meetings / monitoring own learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2009</td>
<td>Collage to express own developing facilitation skills and notes of dialogue about this creative expression.</td>
<td>Baseline assessment of facilitation skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Short questionnaire</td>
<td>Exploration of learning needs and wishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2010</td>
<td>Transcripts of individual interviews (held by CoP member) concerning own learning</td>
<td>Monitoring the development as a PD: What and how learned?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2010</td>
<td>Written narratives concerning own learning</td>
<td>Monitoring the development as a PD: What and how learned?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
<td>Transcripts of presentations and reflections in CoP</td>
<td>Monitoring the development as a PD: What and how learned?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Transcripts of individual interviews on own learning (held by CoP member)</td>
<td>Monitoring the development as a PD: What and how learned?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

This data included interim experiences and stories collected at various times and by various means with a two-fold aim - monitoring the development of the CIU and monitoring own development as PD’ers. Miranda kept a log book with field notes on activities such as the CoP and action research projects, in which she reflected on both the progress made and her own role. Meeting minutes and audio recordings were made of CoP meetings and AR group meetings, as well as evaluative discussions of these meetings by Ragna and Miranda. Individual interviews were conducted by a fellow member of the CoP, on two separate occasions, and used to
monitor the development as PD’ers and to identify interim results. Data to nourish
the learning process was also collected by an open answer questionnaire and
creative expressions, such as making a collage and writing a story, that were then
shared and discussed in the CoP. The interviews and conversations were audio
recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, Ragna and Miranda expressed
reflections of their lived experiences in a personal portfolio. At the end of the
CoP, Ragna and Miranda presented their learning and development as PD’ers and
results of facilitating the learning of others, to their fellow CoP members. These
presentations or narratives, as well as the ensuing discussions, were recorded and
transcribed verbatim.

Following what Ellis (2004) calls ‘thematic analysis of content’ (p. 196) to
theorise narratives, the interim personal experiences (data) were given further
meaning by the use of a critical creative hermeneutic data analysis (van Lieshout &
Cardiff, 2011). This is a cyclical and collaborative process of analysis using
creativity and dialogue whereby various types of knowledge and individual
perspectives are brought together and integrated, rendering a deeper and shared
meaning of themes that emerge from the narrative data. This was performed as
follows.

Before a meeting in which Ragna and Miranda shared their personal stories,
they individually read through the data collected during the mentoring relationship
and relived, separately from each other, their experience of the relationship. The
analysis question in mind was: What is the nature of the mentor relationship and
how is personal en professional learning and growth reflected within this
relationship? In the meeting that followed, personal experiences, thoughts and
feelings about the mentoring relationship were further explored and articulated in
a creative fashion by making an individual collage and then shared. By reacting to
each other’s creative expression, using critical questions and dialogue, shared
meaning was given to the relational experience. Important episodes and recurring
themes in the narratives, as well as similarities and differences between
experiences and perspectives, were identified and explored further in dialogue,
then illustrated with data from the collected material. By reorganising and relating
collaboratively these episodes, themes and illustrative data in more or less
chronological order, and making joint decisions about which aspects should be
included as well as how that should be done, the narrative came into being. The
co-constructed narrative was then written up by Miranda using audio recordings of
the oral reconstruction of the story. The written narrative reflects the voices and
authentic beings of both, and was checked and developed according to Ragna’s
feedback until both agreed with the content and atmosphere of the story.

Finally, by placing the narrative in relation to theoretical insights, an attempt
was made to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of a high quality mentoring

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<td>June 2009</td>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>Monitoring the development as a PD: wishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2009</td>
<td>Reflection on facilitation of AR group</td>
<td>Monitoring AR projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2010</td>
<td>Written narratives concerning own learning</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
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<td>Monitoring the development as a PD: what and how learned?</td>
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<td>October 2009</td>
<td>Short questionnaire</td>
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<td>May 2009 – July 2011</td>
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<td>April 2009 – May 2009</td>
<td>Minutes and audio recordings of meetings with AR</td>
<td>Reflections on facilitation of AR group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009 – July 2011</td>
<td>Minutes and audio recordings of dyadic evaluations of groups</td>
<td>Monitoring AR projects</td>
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relationship and the mentoring outcomes of learning and growth (Ellis et al., 2010).

Quality procedures and ethics

The nature of a reciprocal, friendship-based mentoring relationship itself leads to rich data collection and analysis, and profound insights into the experience can be gained as the participants in the relationship are more open and vulnerable (Sassi & Thomas, 2012; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). A co-constructed auto-ethnography also avoids a number of ethical issues, such as consent and privacy (Ellis, 2007). Nevertheless, a number of quality procedure and ethical aspects must be borne in mind.

Quality procedures

It is difficult to recall in detail previous experiences and memories (Ellis et al., 2010) and greater involvement and reciprocal compassion can lead to an uncritical attitude or avoidance of disagreement. In order to increase the credibility of the meta-narrative, we worked with the previously recorded experiences and stories to refresh our memories of the experience. In addition, two independent researchers (Theo and Tineke, the third and fourth authors) were asked to read the written co-constructive narrative to share their thoughts and reflections on it. This provided a check: did the narrative seem coherent, realistic, verisimilar and sincere to readers and capable of allowing the reader to experience the subjective world of Ragna and Miranda (Ellis et al., 2010; Tracy, 2010)?

The thick description (Tracy, 2010), details of the context (Ellis et al., 2010) and explanation of the influence of Ragna and Miranda’s earlier relationship (Garton & Copland, 2010; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2013), enable the reader to compare the world of Miranda and Ragna to his or her own frame of reference and test whether the story could be generalised to his or her own context (Ellis et al., 2010; Stake, 1994). Consequently, the meta-narrative can lead to new insights for readers and opportunities to benefit from the lessons of others.

Ethical considerations

In co-constructed auto-ethnography relational ethics are of principle concern and demand continuous attention. They entail mutual respect, dignity, doing justice to the other and solidarity (Ellis, 2007; Tracy, 2010). The mentoring relationship itself was the subject of this study which meant that there was continuous reflection on the (changing) relationship. Attention was given to each other’s welfare and both Miranda and Ragna explored their own identity and experienced the relationship as positive and of high quality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Ragins & Dutton, 2007).
Both Miranda and Ragna were able to influence the research content and procedures and the chosen analytical method was familiar to both. Nevertheless, mutual compassion and a consequential danger of over-empathising, and the power imbalance resulting from differences in experience, demanded constant attention (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2013; Sassi & Thomas, 2012). Through continuous negotiation (Ellis, 2007), discussion about how the relationship influenced the individual, and reflexivity (Etherington, 2007; Tracy, 2010), self-awareness and care for self and the other was encouraged.

The story of mutual learning

The co-constructed narrative was created in dialogue and is as such presented here, following more or less chronologically the themes that emerged from the data analysis and letting them structure the narrative. By displaying both voices and perspectives the nature of the mentoring relationship and how personal and professional learning evolved are illustrated.

Laying the groundwork

“I remember so well the day I found out that you were appointed as junior PD’er,” Miranda says while sipping her tea. She and Ragna are sitting in Miranda’s living room re-living their relationship. It is a sunny Friday morning. “I was excited and anxious at the same time. Excited, because I loved working with you in earlier days. We were often on the same wavelength and could always rely on each other. I really looked forward to a new close collaboration. On the other hand, it made me feel uncertain too.” Ragna frowns, wondering why Miranda had felt this way. Miranda continues, “I was concerned about the change in roles. I was not sure if you would accept me as a mentor and if I could offer you enough help to develop. I felt responsible and wanted this to work, but was afraid that you would be disappointed in me.” “Well”, Ragna responds, “it was actually because of you that I chose to be a PD’er. It made my choice easier. I felt comfortable with you and I trusted you.” Both chuckle. “Yes, it’s true. I felt the need for a new challenge and this was the logical step I had been searching for. I wanted to extend and develop myself and I was confident that with your collaboration and coaching this would be a pleasurable and fruitful experience.” Miranda blushes. “Really?” she asks. “Really,” Ragna confirms.

Both sink into their own thoughts till Miranda breaks the silence: “Do you remember that busy and hectic time shortly after our collaboration had formally begun? We were both absorbed with practical matters, in particular the preparatory meetings with the team on the new CIU.” Ragna nods. “You facilitated
Those meetings to a large extent, for which I had great respect.” “Well, you were involved in preparing content and evaluation, and you took over certain organisational duties such as planning meetings. You relieved me of some tasks,” Miranda says while filling their tea cups. “You were a great help. It gave me the feeling that I was no longer alone; that we were both responsible for developing the CIU. As such, there was a social exchange early in our relationship (Rutti et al., 2013). That, your enthusiasm and open attitude towards learning, and your great confidence in me, which you explicitly expressed, made me feel less burdened. It created space for me to be more open about my own uncertainties and the difficulties and dilemmas I was experiencing in my work as a PD’er.” Ragna interrupts, “For me it was helpful that you emphasised what was going well as I have the tendency to be self-critical and focus on things I’m not satisfied with. You showed appreciation of my acquired knowledge and skills. It created space and support for me to take initiative and responsibility. I became more self-confident because of the way our collaboration developed.”

“Yes,” Ragna replies, “we both increasingly dared to reveal our vulnerability, asked each other for feedback and expressed our appreciation of each other.”

“Like we are doing now,” Miranda replies, laughing.

**Organising purposeful learning processes**

Miranda’s cell phone rings. Although she normally ignores her phone when in a meeting, she picks it up expecting a call that can’t wait. While Miranda is answering, Ragna thinks more about the busy period in the beginning. She remembers that although preparing team meetings together had helped to promote their mutual collaboration, it was not sufficient to concentrate only on the content of the work, in which they were driven simply by the pressures of everyday working life. Ragna starts to search through all the papers that are spread out on the ground. By the time Miranda hangs up, Ragna has found what she was looking for: “Here, for example, I commented,”
‘My self-development comes under threat because I have to ‘produce so much.’ I do learn from that too, but not as quickly as I could if I consciously worked on it.’ (Questionnaire RR, November 2009).”

“I beg your pardon?” Miranda answers. “Oh, sorry,” Ragna reacts, realising that she has lost Miranda in her musings. “I was thinking more about this busy period. It was a few months after the formal start of our mentoring relationship. Because of the hectic and bustle we were experiencing, we decided to pay more conscious and purposeful attention to our learning and development process. As is promoted by Schunk and Mullen (2013), we agreed to formulate learning aims and tasks on which we would focus and support each other, and which we would evaluate systematically. I remember that you formulated quickly and effortlessly a number of such learning tasks aimed at giving better support to others in a situation. They were concrete and tailored to your self-knowledge, strengths and weaknesses.”

Ragna picks up a sheet: “Here, like this:

‘Really listening to other people and keeping my own perspective and ideas more in the background, myself less in the foreground.’ (Aim MS in Minutes CoP, June 2009).

You shared your aims with me and asked for feedback. For me, however, this period was very confusing.” Ragna sighs and sinks back into the couch. “Yeah, I remember your struggle,” responds Miranda. She senses the shift in Ragna’s mood. She encourages Ragna to talk further: “How do you look back on this period exactly?”

Ragna takes a minute to think. Then she says, “I had so much to learn and could not see precisely what that was or how to go about it. I was confronted with myself, my uncertainties and difficulties. Looking at myself made me insecure asking myself, ‘Do I really like this?’ I had to overcome personal resistance and self-doubt.” She starts to search the stack of papers. “I’m sure I wrote something about this period in my portfolio. Oh, here it is.

‘Busy with too many things at one time. Critical, uncertain. Dreading it. The goal I set myself: throwing out my resistance to consciously looking at myself, experience what this gives me and with that define the learning process. Give myself a bit of peace.’ (Personal note portfolio RR, December 2009).

Much later, when I mentored novice facilitators myself, I realised that it is quite normal for a novice to face such difficulties (Crisp & Wilson, 2011; van der Zijpp & Dewing, 2009).” “You were quite open about your struggle,” Miranda answers. “But after two months or so you still didn’t have anything on paper. I didn’t know
how to support you in this and because of that I let it go, I think.” “Yes, you did,” Ragna confirms. “But what helped you then?” Miranda asks. “Well, I felt that my struggle was okay for a while. I was a junior and you expressed that there was no need to rush nor that things had to be perfect. You believed in me. Furthermore, in the CoP meetings I heard that other less experienced facilitators also had difficulties in expressing learning aims and tasks. This gave me some air. Besides, you kept involving me in processes and activities within the CIU. You explained the reasons for your actions, let me practice under supervision and evaluated situations with me, which was in line with my learning preferences like I mentioned in this questionnaire:

‘I like to decide my approach beforehand. Particularly, to discuss possible strategies in various situations. Try these out, preferably with a colleague. The exemplary actions of others help too. By means of feedback and conscious self-reflection I complete the cycle. A lot of practice situations help me to master skills. I learn from the experience by consciously considering it afterwards.’ (Questionnaire RR, November 2009).

Ragna continues, “You were an example to me. I held on to the confidence I had in you and trusted that we did the right things within the CIU. You were sensitive to me and tried to adapt as much as possible to my vulnerability.” “Hmm,” Miranda reacts, “I don’t believe that my support or actions were so purposefully planned. I didn’t give it much thought. I just acted.” “Your support gave me security, back-up and a foot-hold in this unfamiliar and uncertain phase,” Ragna carries on. “I not only learned some basic facilitation skills, I also learned more about myself as I have mentioned in this interview here.” Ragna points to a piece of paper:

‘In any case a bit more conscious of qualities and learning points. That is very different to when I began this eighteen months ago’ (Interview RR, March 2010).

She continues, “Slowly I gained insight into what I still wanted or needed to learn in order to become a ‘good’ PD’er. My learning aims became more concrete and focussed on learning how to conduct myself in facilitation situations and facilitation strategies such as asking questions and then asking more. Although I still felt uncertain about my own capabilities I started to give more shape to my own learning process. I became more independent. I remember that it was then that I began to find this journey fun.”
Reciprocity, connectedness, and responsibility

“Yeah, I recognise what you are telling me,” Miranda says, distractedly exploring her own thoughts. As Ragna puts it, it looks like their relationship was one-sided in which only Ragna learned. However, for her this was not the case. Accompanying Ragna on her journey had enabled Miranda to become more conscious of her already developed knowledge and expertise which she implicitly used when facilitating situations and others. Miranda goes through the documents while Ragna follows her movements wondering what is on Miranda’s mind. “Read this,” Miranda says. “It is something I have said in an interview.”

‘As a facilitator you’re your own tool. That is what I really feel, you must know yourself. And that is a difference I see in the other people [junior PD’ers and CoP members] whom I facilitate. [...] It’s not that they, by definition, do something differently, but when we discuss it I realise that I am far more conscious about my actions and can say why I do certain things in a certain way, or what other strategies I could use. So I uh... it also makes me conscious of the differences in experience’ (Interview MS, March 2010).

Miranda goes on, “For me our relationship was reciprocal. By explaining my actions, seeing myself reflected in you and the feedback, appreciation, support and recognition I received from you, my self-confidence also increased. This was very important to me as it encouraged me to reflect on my role and my ‘being’ as a PD’er. It helped me to continue my development as a role model. What I’m trying to say here is, uhm... Despite the differences in expertise, I believe that a mutual learning process evolved in which we were companions. We were sensitive to each other, both experiencing a great deal of support and an atmosphere in which we could experiment and make mistakes. The respect for each other and the mutual trust increased and there was a strong sense of connectedness and responsibility for each other and the other’s learning process.” “Oh yeah,” Ragna responds, “I certainly agree. We were more sensitive to each other and tried to adapt as much as possible to the other’s vulnerability.” “Hungry?” Miranda asks. Ragna nods.

Experimenting and adapting to the other

While Miranda is making some sandwiches in the kitchen, Ragna makes herself comfortable. She lounges on the couch petting Miranda’s cats. Her thoughts go back to how their intensive collaboration had deepened their relationship and how a dynamic interplay of discovery, complementing and supporting each other had come into being. Through the support she had experienced and the safety of the
mentoring relationship, it had become possible for her to leave her ‘comfort zone’ to start experimenting and improvising more; something which is important as she learned later (Wales, Kelly, Wilson & Crisp, 2013). Whilst she had been more of a follower and observer before, grasping at any and every concrete suggestion and form of help, she had begun to take initiative and increasingly took the lead in both facilitating processes and giving shape to her learning process. Miranda had tried to follow her, first by working alongside her. Miranda had given her positive feedback, and had supported her more and more from the background, only occasionally moving to the foreground. Nevertheless, Miranda had struggled with this.

Ragna stands up from the couch and looks among the papers on the floor. “What are you looking for?” Miranda asks entering the living room. “I’m searching for a note of yours concerning your struggle regarding your alignment with my increasing independence.” “Oh yeah,” Miranda responds, “I found myself constantly searching for a new balance between steering and controlling, ‘doing for’ you, and letting go for you to do for yourself and experiment, something van der Zijpp and Dewing (2009) have also struggled with. I’m sure there are more notes on this topic. Here is one”:

‘It was pretty difficult to hold back. Whenever I have input I have to be careful not to take over. A couple of times I noticed that I would intervene earlier than Ragna. In evaluations afterwards it was agreed to make notes during the meetings whenever I felt the urge to intervene earlier or differently, so as to highlight the differences in our strategies’ (Personal note logbook MS, December 2009).

“For me,” continues Miranda, “it was helpful to discuss and evaluate this issue with you regularly. Explaining my own difficulties and your positive, but critical feedback gave me the feeling it was alright when it didn’t go perfectly. It helped me to be more lenient with myself.” “Still, you increasingly took on the role of observer and gave me more room,” Ragna explains. “Okay, but you more frequently asked critical questions and gave me unsolicited feedback. I believe this led to a shift in the original roles, which strengthened and deepened our relationship further,” Miranda replies passing a plate with sandwiches to Ragna. “Those look delicious! Thank you.” Ragna chooses one, takes a bite and the opportunity to think for a moment before she confirms.

Equal partnership and being responsive

“Yes, we learned more of each other’s inner being and the reasons for our behaviour. There was mutual understanding and I experienced equality, joint
responsibility and mutual trust. I guess we became more equal partners in the development of the CIU.” Ragna remembers further: “I increasingly facilitated projects and groups on my own. By experimenting, through dialogue with you and others, and through reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983), my knowledge and skills broadened. I experienced that I was increasingly in a position to flexibly apply multiple facilitating strategies and relevant theoretical knowledge in unexpected situations such as in group processes. My insight into my own functioning as a person and a PD’er, and how to use this in facilitating others, increased.” “Yes, your learning process evolved rapidly. You were less focussed on the application of tools and techniques (van der Zijpp & Dewing, 2009). This is a nice example of that, I think.” Miranda hands over a transcript.

‘Even if I look at my own process I’m very inclined to rely on an example and do something with it. Even though I notice now that by more concrete consideration - ‘what do I want from this meeting?’- and by thinking about what actions to take to realise this, my development is more rapid than through plain imitation. That’s how I regard facilitation now, purposefully looking at the other: ‘what do you need from me?’ That can be one thing for one person and something else from another’ (Interview RR, March 2010).

Miranda continues, “I also grew, but not that fast. I believe it was more fine-tuning; I deepened my being as a PD’er. For example, I learned to follow others even better and to respond to what was happening. This wasn’t and isn’t a conscious enactment, though, it is more an intuitive or embodied knowing. I also explained this in an interview. It’s the same transcription I handed to you earlier.

‘It’s not that it is the result of cognitive reasoning. It is more something I have experienced or I have an intuitive feeling about. Or I feel it physically as embodied knowledge that… “Heavens, perhaps I should do something else to reach these people?” So it is more through experiencing it’ (Interview MS, March 2010).

“I believe that due to your rapidly evolving learning process, the differences in knowledge and expertise between us decreased. Our learning objectives became more and more similar. Do your recognise that?” Without waiting for an answer Miranda continues: “It was no longer our own individual needs and uncertainties that drove us, but those of others. Your learning aims, for example, shifted from learning practical facilitation skills and handling of self in situations to responding better to others. I recognise this in my own learning. I made such a shift before I started working within this CIU enabling me to connect and to adapt better to
others (Crisp & Wilson, 2011). Oh... your learning process was so similar to mine!” Miranda goes quickly further: “Here, for instance, you asked yourself,

‘To what extent am I responsible for the process and the steps we take? How can I get an overview of what the group needs?’ (Evaluation meeting research group 2, March 2010).

Great, isn’t it?” “Yes,” Ragna answers somewhat hesitantly. “But maybe it went too fast for me sometimes.”

**Becoming and being critical friends**

Miranda looks at Ragna quizzically, waiting for her further explanation. She knows Ragna well enough to know that she will continue soon after organising her thoughts. “Well, first I facilitated meetings and so on myself, but there were other less experienced but talented team members, for example members of AR group 2, who wanted to develop themselves too. They were inspired through our learning processes, and wanted also to learn how to support others in improvements in their unit and how to facilitate AR group meetings. As a result, our roles shifted once again. Do you remember that?” “Yes, of course,” Miranda replies. Ragna clarifies, “I no longer facilitated all the meetings myself, but supported other members of the group in their facilitation similar to how you had supported me. Indeed, my learning process as a role model for others started to show similarities with that of yours earlier in our mentoring process. I even recognise the stages of development that Crisp and Wilson (2011) describe of becoming a PD facilitator in our learning processes. Do you remember their article that you let me read some time ago?” Ragna asks. Miranda nods, encouraging Ragna to continue. “They identify the preliminary stage, the progressive stage and the propositional stage in developing facilitation skills. I believe that at that time I was somewhere in my progressive stage, but I didn’t have the feeling that I had already mastered the facilitation of processes myself. That I had, myself, become a role model for others troubled me the most. On the other hand, I wanted and could move along with this change. I was able to adapt to this new situation through which I evolved as a critical and unique PD’er, slowly slipping into the propositional phase I believe.” Ragna pauses for a moment, then asks Miranda, “How have you experienced this?”

Miranda thinks for a moment. She remembered that as a result of this shift she had held herself more in the background, observing the processes and Ragna’s facilitation. This had provided her new information and had stimulated self-reflection on her role as mentor. She starts to search through all the sheets with
data and picks one up. “I think this will give you a good impression,” Miranda says handing the document over to Ragna, who reads it for herself.

“So I tried to stay right in the background. I noticed how Ragna now facilitated her [a member of AR group 2] in learning facilitation. There were a number of situations when I would have intervened differently [to Ragna]. And by discussing that with her, I made myself aware of why I would have done it a certain way. It helps me to explain it and so clarify my tacit knowledge’ (Interview MS, March 2010).

“This change in roles was helpful for you too?” Ragna checks. “Yes, it was,” Miranda answers, realising that it was through this change that their relationship had continued as critical friends rather than mentor and protégé. They had used this critical friendship as a method (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) for further exploration of their development as facilitators. “I remember that we started to discuss our facilitation and our role as PD’er more at a meta-level, for example by evaluating the part we had played in particular situations. We discussed differences and similarities in our ways of ‘being’ a PD’er, without passing judgement, and spoke at a deeper level about the underlying and sometimes personal reasons for this, the consequences and our perspective.” “That’s true,” Ragna replies. “We questioned each other more critically, revealed ourselves to the other and gave each other constructive feedback. In this way we got to know each other even better. I believe that it created a deep and unshakeable trust in each other. For me this was inspiring more than that I considered it as learning.” “Yeah, I feel what you mean,” Miranda responds. “I believe it led to the further development of an authentic self and a more profound understanding and increased acceptance of self as a person and PD’er. I expressed this in my closing presentation in the CoP.”

‘I think it is about being more accepting what I am good at and what I am not so good at. I think ‘Yes, everybody has their good and less good points’ as you might say. I think I have come to accept that in myself. Yes, that gives a certain peace of mind […] And I notice that I can stay much truer to myself, even when choosing methods of work’ (Closing presentation CoP MS, December 2010).

“Beautiful and recognisable,” Ragna reacts, smiling. “But it was also at this point that I became more aware of the reverse side of our caring relationship.” “Let’s zoom in on that a bit further,” Miranda says while offering Ragna another sandwich.
Similarities and the importance of others

Both sit silently on the couch eating their sandwiches. They are lost in their own thoughts. Miranda remembers that she had wanted to meet Ragna’s expectations and had tried to avoid having Ragna feel uncomfortable. She had reflected on this regularly during their mentoring relationship.

‘I’ve thought about mentioning my observations during a meeting and asking Ragna what she could and would do with such observations. The intention was to encourage her in the meeting to take it up and do something with it. I didn’t do it. The reason is I felt reluctant to do so because I was worried that a) Ragna would feel uncomfortable with it b) that I would present myself to the other group members as ‘someone who knows it all!’’ (Evaluation meeting research group 2, September 2010).

Like Sambrook et al. (2008) do, she wonders if their relationship wasn’t too friendly.

It’s Ragna who eventually breaks the silence, summarising Miranda’s thoughts: “Due to our loyalty, understanding and concern for each other, we were inclined to offer each other more support than challenge. And we had so much in common, like our personal qualities, values, and standards; we frequently thought the same about things and often had the same pragmatic approach. Consequently, my need grew to learn from others, to see other examples and to broaden my horizon. I mentioned that in this interview:

‘If this hadn’t been so, I would have stayed thinking more in my own little framework, my own little circle. The interaction with others, that really helps.’ (Interview RR, March 2011).”

Miranda responds, “Well, I also valued the fresh and stimulating input from others, like participants in the research groups and the CoP. Although I believe that our similarities nourished our caring and reciprocal relationship, as discussed by others (Allen & Eby, 2003; Ragins, 2012), they sometimes made it difficult to think creatively and out-of-the-box. Working with others challenged us to see issues from different viewpoints.”

Ending formally the mentoring relationship

“There is one other thing that puzzles me,” Miranda says. “It concerns the ending of our relationship. I had the feeling that you had mastered aspects of facilitation and the essence of being a PD’er, but you found the step towards ‘doing it entirely
on your own’ and facilitating the further development of the CIU without me stressful. Did I overestimate you?” Ragna smiles: “Oh no! You know me: that was prompted by my uncertainty rather than not having the competencies to do so. We decided that I would facilitate processes without your physical presence in the organisation. By reflecting together on my experience afterwards, I gained the confidence I needed to manage without you as my safety-net. Here, this evaluative note is a good example of it.”

‘Ragna has found greater chances to give support in the facilitating process. She feels freer and more certain without Miranda being there. She can react more spontaneously; otherwise she wants to do well and reacts more cautiously. In Miranda’s absence, Ragna also accepts more readily that she could have done a bit better. Ragna now feels truly responsible whereas before she always had the idea that Miranda could come to the rescue.’ (Evaluation meeting AR group 2, November 2010).

Ragna continues, “It helped me, fully relinquishing your support.” “For me, it felt that it was time to leave the organisation to meet new challenges. Yet, I still miss those good times,” Miranda muses. “Me too. That’s why I always look forward to other projects in which we work together,” Ragna responds, while looking at her watch. She jumps up startled. “School is finished! My children are waiting for me. Sorry.” She grabs her bag, hugs Miranda and disappears, leaving Miranda behind amidst the stacks of documents containing the beautiful stories of their mutual journey.

Discussion

Reflecting on the research question concerning the nature of the mentoring relationship and how learning and growth evolve in it, it is notable that the relationship was characterised principally by person-centredness (Cardiff, 2014) and care. The mentoring process was given shape with care and consideration and included being attentive towards the other, respecting and valuing each other as a person, and having concern for the other’s vulnerability and needs. This was made possible through sensing the state of each other’s being, and supporting and acknowledging the other person in their being, sometimes called ‘presencing’ (Cardiff, 2014), for instance, by expressing appreciation of the other or being physically present at times when the other feels uncertain. In addition, both parties valued learning and there was a clear shared intention to learn.

Factors positively related to mentoring in previous (quantitative) research, such as female gender (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000), communication skills, emotional
intelligence (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) and frequent face-to-face contact (Eddy, D'Abate, Tannenbaum, Givens-Skeaton & Robinson, 2006), are present in the narrative. Although these factors, being present, will have played a role, the analysis shows the mutual sensitivity for each other’s being, and the caring and learning-focussed values to have particularly promoted the development of a high-quality mentoring relationship. They created the conditions for a context or atmosphere in which it was possible to reveal one’s own vulnerability and for ‘communing’ - communicating at a deeper level (Cardiff, 2014), something that occurred, for example, when Ragna and Miranda evaluated situations and considered each other’s uncertainties and their role in the situation. This contributed to strengthening communal norms, according to Ragins (2012) an antecedent for high-quality mentoring relationships, and the development of a deep and close mentoring relationship. There was connectedness, compassion, mutual support and trust, safety to learn and experiment, and equality at the relational level. Despite differences in expertise and experience, the mentoring process was continually and mutually being shaped. There was mutual influence and shared decision-making, resulting in what Kempster and Iszatt-White (2013) call co-constructed coaching. Both tried to respond to the other, feeling committed and responsible, not only for their own growth and learning but for that of the other too. It is in and through acting on these feelings of responsibility and the responsiveness to the other that personal and professional growth takes place.

As Walker (2007) explained, felt responsibilities come from and are given and taken by those involved in active processes and situations on the basis of how one defines one’s self and others (identity), what one finds important (value) and where one stands in relation to the other (relationships). For example, Ragna defined herself as a novice in facilitating and researching group processes and valued ‘meaning something to other people’. From the beginning she offered Miranda practical help in organising meetings, while at the same time she took hold of every form of help and relied on Miranda in her development as a PD’er. Miranda, defining herself as a mentor, felt it important to support Ragna in this. She did so by guiding her ‘from the front and side-line’ (Cardiff, 2014), using physical presence, exemplary behaviour and positive affirmation. This distribution of roles or positioning of the self in relation to the other, which Cardiff (2014) calls ‘stancing’, however, is not static or one-sided. Through engagement, doing and experimenting, both those involved and the situation change and an imbalance occurs, which then stimulates an active re-orientation of self and rearrangement of cognitive, embodied and experiential knowledge in order to find a new balance (Jones & Corner, 2012; Snoeren, Niessen & Abma, 2013; Varela, 1999). In other words, people learn and grow. For instance, Ragna started to identify herself more as an experienced facilitator increasingly taking the initiative and the lead, so that Miranda’s facilitating strategy was no longer suitable and she adjusted herself to
facilitate ‘from alongside and behind’ (Cardiff, 2014). She identified herself and Ragna more and more as critical friends than as mentor and protégé, which made it possible for her to stay more in the background and to have dialogues at a deeper level about personal matters and their ways of ‘being’ a PD’er. Or as Walker (2007) explained: by acting on these felt responsibilities the socially and historically constructed identities, values and relationships are transformed so that another shift occurs in the felt responsibilities.

It is thus in and through this continual process of disturbance and rediscovery of balance that learning and growth occur, which can be unintentional and unconscious, but which acquire an explicit character when feelings of discomfort or puzzlement are experienced (Snoeren et al., 2013; Varela, 1999). For example, when Ragna took over the facilitating of the research group meetings, Miranda experienced a tension between controlling the situation and ‘letting go’. By feeling such internal and/or interpersonal unease, awareness and self-discovery took place and (collective) reflection on the lived experience was encouraged, which lead to new and more profound insights (Eraut, 2004; Kolb, 1984; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). This made sharing knowledge possible (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and triggered the link between doing and thinking, so that the future being is influenced (Cardiff, 2014). In addition, it encouraged both self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 1989), which according to Schunk and Mullen (2013) is important in mentoring, and action learning (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). These elements are present in the narrative above as both Miranda and Ragna formulated, shared and tried out new insights, actions and learning activities, which in turn lead to new lived experiences, reflection and growth along with new disturbances and imbalance in the order of things.

In summary, the narrative illustrates, in line with others (e.g. Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Schunk & Mullen, 2013), that purposeful, incidental and emergent learning reinforce each other and encourage reflective practice (Schön, 1983). It is also clear that learning and growth are continuous and relational processes that take place through participation and interaction, and that the learning of one person is dependent on the learning and growth of the other. The learning and growth of those involved is thus intertwined and interdependent. Learning and development becomes an active, dynamic, reciprocal and interrelated process that is nourished by a sensitive, responsive and caring mentoring relationship which simultaneously enriches and deepens this person-centred relationship.
CHAPTER 3

Meaning and further directions

The narrative presented here is specific to the narrators and context in which the relationship took place and therefore cannot be simply generalised to other contexts. Moreover, this research has limited itself to the relational processes in a dyadic relationship while it is probable that there was reciprocal influence with the broader context (Jones & Corner, 2012). Despite this, the detailed description offers the reader an opportunity of vicarious experience (Stake, 1994), so that he/she can test whether the narrative could be relevant within their own context or life world (Ellis et al., 2010). Mentors and protégés may therefore learn from the narrative insofar as it offers them new insights into the relational processes and outcomes of own mentoring relationships.

In addition, the co-constructed and detailed narrative reflects and connects relational theories and concepts within mentoring. It contributes to a better understanding of mentoring relationships as it illustrates the underlying relational principals and more profound processes that a concept description, such as relational mentoring (Ragins, 2012), might only allude to. Such a concept forms a simplified representation of reality, as it is difficult to capture the true complexity and underlying micro-mechanisms at play (Niessen, Abma, Widdershoven, van der Vleuten & Akkerman, 2008). For instance, mutuality is the norm in relational mentoring and according to Ragins (2012) a high-quality mentoring relationship enables development from an ideal to an authentic self, yet Ragins does not give any in-depth description of how mutuality or an authentic self can develop. The narrative offered here does offer more insight. It demonstrates that antecedents, functions and outcomes of relational mentoring (Ragins, 2012) are not separate elements, but are dynamic and intertwined. They come into being and develop in relation to each other, interacting with each other and continually and mutually influencing each other, more than is represented in the construct of relational mentoring. This makes it plausible that, for example, an antecedent such as mentoring schemas (Ragins, 2009, 2012) should not simply be seen as pre-existing static cognitive representations influencing expectations of behaviour and (inter)actions in the mentoring relationship, but that these schemas are in fact lived, felt and changeable, co-evolving for mentor and protégé through being in relation.

Finally, the narrative suggests a need for further research and indicates a direction for further conceptual elaboration of mentoring relationships. In the first place, it seems appropriate to approach a dyadic mentoring relationship as a co-created and complex system, as suggested by Jones and Corner (2012), by which the dynamic and emergent character of a (high quality) mentoring relationship receives more emphasis. We would advocate the integration of such a perspective
with the concept of relational mentoring. In addition the use of relational leadership theories, such as person-centred leadership (Cardiff, 2014), and their integration in mentoring literature is recommended. Theories of learning and knowledge construction could increase our understanding of relational processes and mentoring outcomes, and may offer frameworks to support the description of high-quality mentoring processes.

Considering the specific nature of this co-constructed auto-ethnography, further research into underlying and relational processes in (high-quality) mentoring relationships is recommended. Such research should focus on what happens in interactions. In addition to the large amount of quantitative research into mentoring relationships, deeper ethnographic studies are needed. These should take place within various contexts and with various types of mentoring relationships in order to further clarify the relational and interactive processes, complementing and deepening existent theoretical insights into mentorship.
References


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