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The meaning of mentoring in middle-managers' learning: mentoring as identity-formation

Authors: Kate Black and Russell Warhurst

*Address: Senior Lecturer / Reader, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University,
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK*

Contact email: kate.black@northumbria.ac.uk / r.warhurst@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

Purpose: The paper critically examines mentoring and bridges the gap between the widespread use of mentoring and the limited evidence of its effectiveness by applying the theoretical lens of identity. Fresh insights are provided into both the processes and outcomes of mentoring.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A critical review of identity theorising enables the refinement of theoretical lenses for understanding mentoring in new ways. Empirically, a qualitative research approach involved image-elicitation interviews focused on the nature of the work and learning of nineteen middle-managers. Interviews were transcribed and analysed inductively using thematic and narrative techniques.

Findings: The findings reveal the processes through which both being mentored and being a mentor enabled middle-managers to undertake identity-work, that is, to form, maintain, secure and advance their managerial identities and to resist identity-regulation. New insights are particularly provided into the contributions of mentoring to career progression.

Research Limitations/Implications: Certain limitations of the research are acknowledged and practical suggestions developed for further research.

Practical Implications: Practical implications include the need for management educators to encourage learners to discern opportunities for informal mentoring and to foster understanding of management as requiring not merely the development of knowledge or competence but as requiring the cultivation of a state of being.

Originality / Value: The paper provides new insights into both the outcomes and the processes of mentoring. Furthermore, that the significance of mentoring arose from the findings rather than being the initial object of the empirical research gives particular credence to the results.

Key words: mentoring, identity-work, identity-regulation, image-elicitation, community-of-practice

Introduction

If there is one area of HRD where a gap between practice and evidence is very much apparent and in need of bridging it is the area mentoring. Mentoring, and coaching are widely used in professional and manager development (Allen and Eby 2007, Cox *et al.* 2012) with a CIPD (2014) survey of HRD practitioners reporting the use of these two tools in 76% of private sector organisations and 85% of public sector bodies. Mentoring in particular has been adopted with “enthusiasm” (Garvey 2012, p.2) and has seen “exponential growth” within UK (Garvey *et al.* 2014). Garvey (2012) thus reported that Clutterbuck’s (1983) text, *Everyone Needs a Mentor* remains an all time best selling business book” (p.11) and Walton (2014) recently observed that there is “quite a cachet, even a boast” attached to having a mentor (p.345).

However, despite the exponential growth in the use of mentoring and a corresponding growth in related research over the past few decades, commentators have noted for a over a decade that evidence of the efficacy lags behind practice (Cox *et al.* 2014, Fillery-Travis and Cox 2014, Ragins and Kram 2007, Underhill 2006). For instance, Grant (2014) asserted that the extent to which either coaching or mentoring helped to develop managers’ capacity to cope with the uncertainties and complexities of organisational change remained unknown. Mentoring in particular is neglected. For example, fewer than ten-percent of the articles in one of the key journals in the area, the *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* focused upon mentoring.

Therefore, the purpose of the research reported in this paper is to help bridge the gap between the use of mentoring and evidence of its effectiveness. This is illustrated through an empirical study of the experiences of mentoring of a group of middle-managers and the meaning of those experiences for the managers interpreted through the novel theoretical lens of identity.

A distinctive strength of this research lies in the fact that, by contrast to most established research in the field, the empirical study did not set out to examine mentoring. Rather, mentoring emerged as a significant experience in a general inquiry into middle-managers' workplace learning. The specific research question addressed by the paper is, simply: to what extent can the traditionally elusive processes and ambiguous outcomes of mentoring be better understood in terms of identity formation? Middle-managers are the focus of the empirical study being in roles requiring both the initiation and implementation of change and, therefore, being in roles requiring learning, particularly workplace learning.

The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, gaps in the established literatures of mentoring are discerned and an identity-based understanding of mentoring is developed to complete key theoretical gaps. Secondly empirical findings are presented illustrating the case-study managers' experiences of mentoring. Finally, theoretical conclusions will be drawn refining the identity-based understanding of mentoring and proposing practice implications.

Theoretical foundations

The theory building in this section of the paper and the empirical findings that follow respond to three noted gaps in the established literature. These gaps are symptomatic of the literature thus far being dominated by texts from a practical, performative, perspective (Garvey 2012, p.71). The gaps are as follows: firstly, critical evaluation of the value of mentoring as a developmental process (Crow 2012, Garvey 2012, Megginson 2000, Passmore 2014, Underhill 2006), secondly, detailed examination of mentoring relationships (Short *et al.* 2014) and thirdly, the theorisation of mentoring (Allen *et al.* 2008). In essence in what follows the processes and existing conceptualisations of mentoring are problematized.

Even after twenty-five years of systematic research, a key challenge in examining mentoring lies in the fact that “a definitive answer to the question ‘*what is mentoring?*’ remains elusive” (Short *et al.* 2014, p.3, see also Clutterbuck 2004, D’Abate *et al.* 2003, Kram 1985, Passmore 2014), with definitions regularly being omitted from publications (Haggard *et al.* 2011). Moreover, mentoring is typically and unhelpfully used interchangeably or conflated with other, quite different, learning relationships at work such as coaching, role-modelling or shadowing (D’Abate *et al.* 2003, Mertz 2004, Passmore 2014, Tyler 2004). However, the formalisation of what has traditionally been an informal, “deeply human, normal and very ordinary activity” (Garvey *et al.* 2014, p.8, see also, Wanberg *et al.* 2006) has helped in differentiating mentoring as a distinct learning relationship. Nonetheless, while coaching has become ever more established as a distinct learning relationship with its own theoretical underpinnings, practical tools and accreditation framework, mentoring remains more amorphous. Therefore, mentoring can best be defined by contrast to coaching in terms of process and outcomes. In terms of processes, by contrast to coaching’s time constrained and techniques based approach, mentoring is a sustained, longer term, learning relationship involving guidance and support from a more experienced, although not necessarily senior, person. In terms of outcomes, by contrast to coaching’s development of specific capabilities, mentoring engenders personal growth through fostering a breadth and depth of capabilities (Clutterbuck 2004, Harvey *et al.* 2009, Kram 1985). In short, whereas coaching might be regarded as a training intervention, mentoring can be considered an educational process.

Research has focussed on ascertaining what learning results from mentoring. Widely reported benefits from being mentored include psychosocial development such as honing facets of emotional intelligence (Haggard *et al.* 2011, Gibson 2004, Kram 1983), confidence building (Gannon and Maher 2012) and career sponsorship, or social capital building, through access

to networks (see for example, Allen *et al.* 2008, Beech and Brockbank 1999, Crow 2012, Gannon and Maher 2012, Karrellis and Sandeland 2009). Research also reveals benefits for mentors themselves ranging from the instrumental, such as enhanced visibility and career rejuvenation, to the more altruistic such as satisfaction from helping the next generation (Allen *et al.* 2006, Clutterbuck 2008, Haggard *et al.* 2011). However, the mentoring process is typically construed as asymmetrical, with the mentor being the power-holder with the process, in essence, ensuring mentees conformity to dominant organisational or professional regimes (Garvey 2012, 2014).

In the specific case of the mentoring of managers, ensuring conformity may extend beyond ways of doing to ways of being. While learning to be a manager clearly involves the acquisition of pertinent knowledge and skill it also requires the development of affective qualities, that is, constructing a way of being (Rigg and O'Dwyer 2012). Moreover, practice-based theorising has highlighted that the capable performance of any activity is defined and developed through positioning within pertinent communities of practice (Nicolini 2013). Learning thus involves the “appropriation” of a particular identity in relation to established community members through a process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 1991). Therefore, managerial mentoring might fruitfully be examined as a process of managerial identity formation.

While mentoring has yet to be well researched using an identity lens, identity is a key concept in the management literature and examined from diverse theoretical perspectives. Alvesson (2010) thus discerned no fewer than seven “images” of identity theorising. At one end of a continuum, theoretical perspectives are classified using pessimistic images implying structural control of individuals’ identities such as the “struggler” image which understands identity in

terms of a fight against the odds to establish coherence and control of a fleeting, fragile and vulnerable self or the “stencil” image which understands identity in terms of the replication within the individual of prevailing social norms. At the other end of the continuum, theoretical perspectives are classified using more positive images such as the “soldier”, slogging towards a desired state of being, albeit a state of being sanctioned by those in power, or the “strategist” who is able to wrest control of structural forces, take control and act agentically in achieving a desired identity-construction.

Identity is defined in what follows as the “meanings that individuals attach reflexively to their selves” (Brown 2015, p.2), in other words, who the individual attempts to be for themselves and others. In theoretical terms this paper assumes a stance that emerges from the post-modern, social-constructionist tradition. Identity is thus understood as being “crafted” (Watson 2008, p.130) through interaction with, and for, others, at specific times and in specific situations (Beech *et al.* 2012, Thomas *et al.* 2014). This social-constructionist approach to identity implies that an individual may “articulate one or more identities for themselves” (McKenna 2010, p.10) and that these identities might be conflicted and in tension (Ashcraft 2005).

That identity is not given but requires crafting points to the need for “identity-work”. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) define identity-work as “people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (p.1165). Therefore, individuals actively “author versions of themselves” (Coupland and Brown 2012, p.1), making sense of themselves and their lives in a sustainable, coherent and meaningful way. Such ‘authoring’ occurs through interaction with others but also within the self.

“Performative identity-work” (McInnes and Corlett 2012) is undertaken to meet personal or social expectations, pressures or obligations to enact a particular identity (p.32-33). Personal expectations include working to achieve a preferred or “aspirational” version of “who they want to become” (Thornborrow and Brown 2009, p.356). Social expectations include working on the self to align with, for example, prevailing understandings of what it means to be a manager within a specific organisation. Such performative identity-work is invoked, for example, in attempts at career progression where “possible” and “provisional” selves are trialled en-route to the desired identity (Coupland and Brown 2012, p.2). However, as Brown (2015) noted, “our identities are often challenged, denied or ignored by others” (p.9). Managers are particularly likely to suffer such ontological insecurities, being in a role that is open to challenge from those above them and below them in their organisational hierarchies (Thompson and McHugh 2009).

Identity-work is largely accomplished through narrative (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). However, dominant discursive regimes may covertly distort, derail or discipline desired identity-projects in order to “produce particular kinds of subjects” (McKenna, 2010, p.19; see also Beech *et al.* 2012, Sims 2003). As being a manager is typically a desired role so managers might be lured unthinkingly into narrating, that is, constituting, themselves uncritically in terms of the seductive, performative organisational discourses sanctioned by their seniors. Discursive resources might thus be used for identity-regulation rather than identity-work (Brown and Lewis 2011, Sturdy *et al.* 2006). In Alvesson’s (2010) terms, managers who constitute themselves in this manner can be imaged as constructing “stencil” or “soldier” identities.

Such perspectives might, though, be considered overly deterministic. Indeed, some scholars would argue that individuals are more likely to agentially select the discursive resources available to them in constructing an independently determined sense-of-self (for example, Ashcraft 2005). On balance, the weight of scholarly opinion suggests a mid-way position of a mutually constitutive process of “continuing dialectic of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’” in identity construction (Brown 2015, p.7).

In conclusion, the role of informal social learning within workplace communities in enabling identity-work has been theorised (for example, Nicolini 2013) and to some extent evidenced (Black and Warhurst 2015). However, the theorisation of identity-work developed here has yet to be thoroughly applied in explaining the learning arising from workplace mentoring. The paper now turns to examine the processes of data generation and will then proceed to present findings and interpret these in terms of identity-work.

The empirical study

Allen et al.’s (2008) review revealed that “of the 207 [mentoring] studies coded, the vast majority were exclusively quantitative [*and*] correlational” (p.348), a situation which, the authors asserted, “paints a bleak picture of the current methodological state of mentoring research” (p.355). Reacting to such methodological hegemony, Garvey (2012) suggested the need for methodological inventiveness to avoid the current constraints on the “novelty in the knowledge produced” (p.93-94). The current study responds to this suggestion as is now shown.

Aligning with the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative and “analytically inductive” (Bloor 1976) methodological approach is adopted to examine the learning of experienced

middle-managers. Such a methodology recognises that ‘less is more’. Through looking for ‘less’ so we are better able to secure the depth and richness of data that is currently lacking in existing studies of mentoring. In short, the researcher needs to get close to a phenomenon to really understand it.

A cross-sectional research design involved purposively sampled middle-manager participants who were selected as an exemplifying case (Yin 2014). The sample comprised nineteen middle-managers who had completed an MBA within the past 5 years. Diverse participants were recruited thereby ensuring that the findings have broad relevance. Thus, approximately half of these participants were private sector managers ranging from more general career managers with such responsibilities as business development, project management and quality assurance to finance and manufacturing. The other half were public / not-for-profit sector managers such as in local government. Three of the participants were female.

Responding to the reported challenges of examining what has been learnt and how learning has occurred (Fuller and Unwin 2005, McNair 2013), visual-elicitation techniques were deployed in advance of interviews to assist the participants to explore the details of their working-lives and in particular their experiences of learning. Three participant-generated visual-elicitation techniques were used: a career timeline for the preceding five years, a sociogram of workplace interactions and a pictor of how participants viewed themselves as a middle-manager.

By contrast with conventional interview approaches, these interviews focused upon these participant-generated visuals rather than upon pre-determined questions compiled by the researchers. Enabling reflection upon working lives before the interviews resulted in richer

personal narratives and interviewer questions were used only when necessary to clarify understanding. Participants' meanings were thereby prioritised (Willig 2008). The interviews, which varied in length from 45-102 minutes, were recorded and transcribed.

The interview transcripts, which comprised over 256,500 words in total, formed the main data-set for analysis. A multi-staged inductive analytical approach was adopted. Initially, following multiple readings of the transcripts, themes were discerned from the data independently by each of the two researchers. These two coding-sets were then compared and contrasted in order to establish an agreed set of theme-codes. Through iteration with theory, these themes were subsequently refined and organised to generate higher level codes. Codes were then grouped and refined by constant comparison. Approximately 30 higher level codes emerged through this process. With these codes explaining much of the empirical data "category saturation" was reached, confirming the robustness of the coding.

Every effort was made to ensure that, at all stages, the research conformed to accepted standards for contemporary qualitative inquiry (Tracy 2010). For instance, that the research was largely participant-led ensures the credibility of the findings. Additionally, it is recognised that researchers are inevitably intertwined with their research process. Therefore, the researchers were attentive to how they may have been influencing the analysis and reflexively examined possible influences to ensure that interpretations stayed close to the data and that discrepant cases were considered (Silverman 2011).

Findings

The empirical research enabled participants to reflect broadly about their working lives as middle-managers. Within these accounts of managerial life, and without prompting from the

researchers, experiences of being the recipient of workplace mentoring featured prominently and experiences of providing mentoring were also evident although to a lesser extent. While explicit references to mentoring feature in the accounts of the small number of participants who had been formally mentored, mentoring has generally been inferred. Illustrative of the need for such inference, a number of participant comments indicated that the existence of a mentoring relationship does not necessarily require awareness on the part of the mentor that they are acting as a mentor. For example, one participant commented;

“He doesn’t realise it but he has become my mentor”.

While the definition presented earlier assists in discerning evidence of mentoring, in reflecting the earlier discussion of the amorphous nature of mentoring, one participant who commented explicitly on his experiences of being mentored noted how;

“Everybody just does it differently”.

There was considerably more evidence of participants receiving informal mentoring than formal mentoring and participants who had formal mentors typically evidenced having self-selected an additional informal mentor. One middle-manager participant, a Police Inspector, was typical in his explanation that;

“I have one assigned mentor, a Superintendent, and also somebody who I can turn to if I need to. He’s one of my colleagues, a Detective Inspector on the major incident team”.

Whereas such informal mentoring might typically occur as a senior approaches a junior and takes them “under the wing”, informal mentoring among the participants in this study was usually purposefully sought reflecting participants’ quest for identity-positions as progressive managers who were open to change and learning. One participant was typical in observing;

“If you stop the rest of the world overtakes you and you become the master of a world that no longer exists”.

Participants typically sought mentors who they regarded as suitable for sustaining desired identity-positions. Thus, one participant noted;

“You’ve got to network among the ‘right’ people and approach such people off the record see if they’ll be your mentor”.

In asserting that line managers were unsuitable as mentors, participants were seeking a social space in which to work on becoming the sort of manager they wanted to become. For instance, one participant noted;

“My mentor is not to be confused with my line manager. My manager assesses my behaviours and my performance. My mentor is one step removed from that”.

Colleagues more senior than direct line managers were generally selected as informal mentors. Participants were thus behaving strategically, choosing those from whom they could best build and maintain their sense of themselves as middle-managers.

However, one-third of the participants evidenced being mentored by peers or even by juniors, the latter being known in the literature as “reverse-mentoring” (Haggard *et al.* 2011, p.299). Peers, typically from outside the participant’s own organisation, were generally chosen as mentors to build a sense of security through reciprocal reassurance that the individual was not alone in their struggle to become a capable middle-manager. For example, one participant reflected that he cultivated a supportive relationship with a couple of peers on the basis that they;

“Are dealing with similar things to me, so I can bounce all these problems and ideas around with them and that's how you learn how to deal with them”.

Juniors were typically selected as mentors on the basis of their being more experienced in specific areas of work. Such relationships can be seen to have fostered the sense of security derived from defining the self as a learner. One participant thus observed;

“Fortunately I have some very experienced staff and so I’m able to learn from these people below me in the hierarchy. They have that experience that I lack”.

Similarly, certain participants selected informal mentors from among those below them in the hierarchy on the grounds that they were older, more experienced in life, and thereby capable of enabling such participants to gain perspective and understand themselves in a new light. However, indicative of the importance of mentoring to building or sustaining a desired sense-of-self, participants only initiated and maintained relationships with mentors for whom they had respect, regardless of the mentor’s status. A number of reports demonstrated clear respect, and even affection for mentors, with one participant noting that his senior manager mentor;

“Might officially be the Head of Refuse Services, but I call him Head Bin Man ... he knows everything there is to know”.

As is evident in the above quotation, mentors were often sought on the basis of their possession of knowledge or skills that were sought by the participants. Demonstrating their command of requisite knowledge, or, at least, knowing who knew what needed to be known, and being appropriately skilled were important to participants’ sense-of-self as managers. One participant was typical here in reflecting;

“Without question I’d have been absolutely lost without him as my mentor. I wouldn’t have known anything or how to do anything in this role”.

Participants' accounts thus provide considerable evidence that much of the direct learning from their mentors involved developing their knowledge and skills, such as being able to better manage their time and workload. However, such learning was also, and crucially, enhancing participants' self-esteem and confidence, that is, their sense of themselves as middle-managers. For instance, one participant reflected the views of many in reporting;

“Working it through with him gave me more confidence in the decisions I was making and I thought, ‘I’m ok at this. I can do this. This is me’”.

A related and widely evidenced outcome from being mentored was that the process helped the participants understand themselves and thereby strengthened their sense-of-self as a middle-manager. A number of participants reported that their mentor had helped them to make greater sense of their management experiences, especially those experiences that had been troubling and confusing. This sense-making was encapsulated in one participant's account of how he had now recognised that being a middle-manager was,

“Just like playing chess, but you’ve got to be the only one who knows the next few moves”.

This participant went on to report that such realisation had helped him to accept that complexity was part-and-parcel of what it meant to be a manager at his level. Other participants reported a similar sense-making process. Mentors had challenged them to question themselves and adopt alternative ways of seeing, believing and performing thereby providing greater conviction in their abilities and actions as managers.

Being mentored by peers and juniors particularly contributed to enabling participants to make sense of themselves as middle-managers situated within the context of their workplace communities-of-practice. Such situated sense-making was further fostered for the many

participants who benefitted from multiple concurrent mentors. Multiple mentoring enabled participants to appreciate the diverse perspectives within workplace communities and to thereby construct identities in relation to those communities as suggested by the practice theorising discussed earlier (Nicolini 2013).

The outcome from mentoring most clearly recognised and asserted by participants themselves was the identity formation arising from actual and envisioned career-progression. One participant was typical in reporting how his mentor had given him an important career opportunity early in his career, sending him;

“To work with customers in Europe and North Africa to gain experience. I then came back to the UK as the expert in this field. I was still young but I felt that I could do anything”.

Many accounts showed that participants’ current mentors provided guidance with regard to career aspirations and some participants specifically noted how they now modelled themselves on the careers of senior manager mentors.

By showing a preference for senior managers as mentors it is likely that participants were behaving strategically and seeking visibility and, thereby, career sponsorship rather than merely enhancing their managerial learning which might have been better achieved through line-manager mentorship. One participant was typical in reporting how a senior-manager mentor was positioning him as a candidate for membership of the aspired community of seniors, noting how this mentor;

“Is my champion. It’s him who will sponsor me for my next move. We have a formal career process, but really it’s all down to who your mentors are”.

Such mentoring, can be seen as a process of re-defining the recipient in relation to a new community-of-practice, that is, as enabling the appropriation of a new identity through alignment with the politics and culture of the target community. This outcome was evident in a number of accounts. For example, certain participants had learnt from their mentors how best to “play it”, that is, to position themselves through using discourses aligned with the expectations of senior managers or directors. Participants also recognised the more indirect career benefits of being mentored by seniors, such as the access they gained to networks that could enhance their authority. For instance, one participant was typical in observing;

“Now I know that I can just knock on the door in the C-suite, I can just go in and have a chat. That’s how I get things done too”.

Such repositioning was also aided by peer mentoring. Peer mentors facilitated experimentation with possible, provisional, selves within alternative communities to those workplace communities within which the managers’ identities were fixed by formal reporting relationships and responsibilities. One participant explicitly referred to being able, through his peer mentors, to;

“Trial new approaches and gauge reactions in a safe environment”.

Turning to analyse the evidence of the actual processes of learning that can be associated with mentoring relationships reveals a continuum from facilitative to directive processes and this is illustrated in figure 1. In reporting actual experiences of being mentored, participants typically emphasised facilitative behaviours. For example, one participant explained;

“Ever since my first day as manager twenty-odd years ago I’ve had this comforting, support. He’s always offered me genuine guidance and reassurance as and when I’ve needed it”.

Similarly, direct statements about their own mentoring of staff reveal that participants generally attempted to, in the words of one participant;

“Move away from ‘true’ management and towards looking at people’s development instead”.



Figure 1: Processes of learning identified by the research participants that can be associated with mentoring relationships (*size of text reflects occurrence of the process within the data*)

Facilitative mentoring approaches enabled participants to both better understand themselves as managers and to extend their capabilities and confidence, in other words, to undertake identity-work, in a number of ways. For example, mentors were noted to use challenging questioning in prompting reflection. One participant thus remarked that his mentor had guided his reflection such that;

“He forced me to think about why I thought my approach worked better. When I couldn’t do that it made me reconsider whether I should go back to first principles and start again. He challenged me to think it through”.

Similarly, mentors, particularly formal mentors, were reported to engineer opportunities with one participant reflecting;

“He was my mentor. He was in his sixties. Whenever some new initiative came along he would always say, ‘here you are, have a go’”

Another participant similarly noted the opportunity afforded by a mentor of seeing what it was to be a middle-manager within the workplace community-of-practice;

“He would say ‘come and sit with me, shadow me, come into meetings with me’. So in working alongside him I learnt some of the defining features of the role such as how to plan for future changes”.

By contrast, as Figure 1 also indicates, the accounts of certain participants evidence more directive experiences of mentoring, with the mentor attempting to shape a recipient’s way of being a manager. Notably all three female participants in speaking of their mentoring of others, spoke of *“direction”* and *“supervision”* for the purposes of *“performance”* with one asserting;

“I just need to mould him into shape”.

This corrective, or regulatory, tone was evident in another participant’s explanation of how;

“In holding this sort of a mentoring role, I always have to bang heads together”.

However, certain participants had these same expectations of their own mentors, with the terms *“direction”* and *“steer”* appearing in their accounts with no apparent sense of dissatisfaction with this regulatory approach. For instance, one participant explained how,

“He shaped me and directed me, so it was a proper mentoring relationship”

In sum, whether being mentored was experienced more as an opportunity for identity-work in securing an aspirational managerial self or as an attempt to regulate the sense of managerial self, the process was fundamentally about becoming and being a middle-manager. In other

words, mentoring was forming, maintaining and advancing managerial identities with one participant concluding;

“I didn’t have the confidence in myself to be able to do this role, so, for me, the interactions I had with my mentor really were about building my confidence that I could actually be a middle-manager”.

Moving on to examine the managers’ experiences of acting as mentors, the data reveals that being a mentor can similarly be interpreted in terms of identity formation. As others have found, being a mentor was “a two-way street” (Jones, 2012, p.67), facilitating the mentor’s own development as much as the mentee’s (Allen *et al.* 2006, Dunphy *et al.* 2008, Haggard *et al.* 2011). Such reciprocity was encapsulated in one participant’s comment;

“When I’m mentoring somebody I always get as much out of it as they do as they bring in other knowledge, experiences”.

Being a mentor enabled participants to define or refine their understanding of what it was to be a middle-manager. For example, in progressing their managerial careers certain participants had taken on more strategic responsibilities such that through mentoring others, as one participant noted;

“I’ve had to relearn how to bring people along, learning again how to involve them”.

For other participants, being a mentor helped with making sense of themselves through understanding “ground-level” practice within their team or organisation and thereby developing a more holistic sense of themselves as managers in the middle. Understanding what it was to be a middle-manager arose particularly from fielding, as one noted;

“A horrible question, like, ‘why do you do it like that?’”

For certain participants, answering such difficult questions forced them to evaluate the essence of their management, through, as one participant noted;

“Explaining why my approach is better and if I can’t do that then it makes me think, ‘well maybe my approach isn’t better?’ ‘Maybe I should go back to first principles?’”

However, generally, participants’ involvement in mentoring others contributed more directly to maintaining a managerial sense-of-self. For instance, some evidenced self-gratification from being ‘needed’ while others were aware of the personal career benefits arising from demonstrating leadership such as the participant who noted;

“It’s about who you’re helping that makes you famous here. That really helps you in your career because you become known by the people that count”.

Being perceived as knowledgeable was, as has been noted, important to managerial identity, and one participant was typical in reporting that she was always willing to act as a mentor because she derived considerable satisfaction and a sense of self-worth from hearing colleagues say;

“Go and ask Sue about that, she’s the expert’. So lots of people come to me to ask my advice and I like that. It makes me feel important”.

A somewhat darker aspect of this identity building is, though, revealed in another participant’s report that;

“They need to come to me, so I have like a power relationship with them really”.

The above statement, implying the need for a traditional, power-based, managerial relationship, can be interpreted as revealing a degree of vulnerability and insecurity in the managerial self. Such vulnerability is also evident in the accounts of providing mentoring of two of the three female participants and is illustrated by their observations that;

“I’ll give a lot of support to them, but I expect to get that in return”;

“I make sure they work the way I need them to, so they work effectively with me, using my way of doing things”.

By contrast and more generally, participants were using their mentoring of others to build a distinctive sense of managerial self as more people-orientated and more virtuous than the prevailing “macho”, power-based, norms of what it is to be a manager. As one participant explained;

“I’m mentoring this guy because he is incredibly undervalued. He is a quiet person so he doesn’t bang the drum about himself but that means that he doesn’t get recognised without others demonstrating his worth to the company”.

Similarly, other participants evidenced a desire to continue a “line” of managerial distinctiveness as is evident in the comment;

“I have a commitment to pass on what he did for me ... I feel that I ought to give that back. I’ve a responsibility to make sure that everything he did for me isn’t wasted”.

Interpretation and discussion

The findings above have directly contributed to completing the first of two gaps within the existing literature that were detailed earlier, by providing empirical evidence of both the processes and the outcomes of mentoring. The second gap detailed, the theorisation of mentoring, is now addressed. Aligning with the results of established research (Jones 2012), the results have shown how being mentored enabled the acquisition of knowledge and the development of the skills required in middle-management roles. However, as was established in the literature review, the outcomes of mentoring experiences must also to be understood in terms of identity formation. As was discussed, Alvesson (2010) proposed that researchers

should use not just one but, rather, a range of images, or perspectives, in theorising identity at work. Of the seven theoretical images discerned by Alvesson, two, contrasting images, of “strategist” and “stencil”, are particularly germane for understanding the processes and outcomes of mentoring in terms of identity formation.

The results have shown that on the one hand being or ‘becoming’ a middle-manager involved using mentoring in a purposeful way in crafting a desired and secure sense of self. On the other hand, identity tensions were apparent with mentoring tempting managers into subjugation to dominant organisational regimes. However, the research has demonstrated that in the main, experiences of mentoring contribute to the on-going performative identity-work (McInnes and Corlett 2012) required in establishing, maintaining and furthering a sense of being a middle-manager. Through such an identity lens managers can be understood in Alvesson’s terms as “strategists”, that is, in agentially creating aspirational versions of themselves (Brown and Toyoki 2013, McInnes and Corlett 2012, Tomlinson and Colgan 2014), versions of themselves that afford power and prestige.

The established literature shows that managers, and middle-managers in particular, experience threats to their sense-of-self, resulting in fragile, vulnerable identities (for example, Brown 2015, Huzzard and Wenglén 2005, Sims 2003, Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). However, the research here has demonstrated the various ways that being mentored and being a mentor enables managers to cope with, or perhaps lessen, the sense of self-doubt that is inherent in the role, to boost self-confidence and to thereby establish a measure of ontological security. Firstly, mentoring assists managers in making sense of personal experiences (Weick 1995) and, thereby, of themselves, in the complex and ambiguous world of middle-management. Secondly, being a mentor for others is especially helpful in “keeping a particular narrative

going” (Giddens 1991, p.54), a narrative of the self as a manager as a knowledgeable expert thereby strengthening the sense-of-self. Thirdly, acting as a mentor serves to position the manager as someone worthy of recognition within the organisation (see Haggard *et al.* 2011, Kamdar *et al.* 2006). Finally, while gender-based assertions are not strongly supported by the current research, the results at least suggest that such identity-work to achieve a secure sense of managerial self might well be required more of female than male middle-managers. Being a mentor can though be considered just as important for female managers’ identity-work as being the recipient of mentoring.

Continuing with a strategic understanding of identity, a further facet of identity-work associated with mentoring is illuminated. Earlier it was seen how a practice-based theoretical lens construes the competent performance of any activity in terms of individuals’ positioning or repositioning within pertinent communities-of-practice (Nicolini 2013). Learning thus involves the appropriation of a particular identity in relation to established community members through a process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger 1991). The findings show how mentoring assists middle-managers in such a learning process by enabling access to networks and communities-of-practice of more senior managers. Managers are thus enabled to engage in legitimate peripheral participation within the target community, refining their identities and repositioning themselves as affiliates of that community. The research revealed how peer mentoring particularly supported such relationally based identity-work. Through peer mentoring managers are able to trial “provisional selves” (Ibarra 1999) and thereby to develop or hone target identities within parallel, and safer, distal communities outside of the proximate workplace communities.

Contrasting theoretical lenses can be applied to the results of this research and the learning arising from mentoring can be understood from the perspective of identity replication or even identity-regulation. Thus, learning can be considered as a process involving the individual becoming a “stencil” of existing socially structured ways of being or the individual becoming a “soldier” carrying forward ways of being that are sanctioned by the powerful (Alvesson 2010). Experiences of mentoring were analysed as lying on a facilitative-directive continuum. Managers receiving directive mentoring can be understood as the targets of regulatory practices aimed at “producing particular kinds of subjects” and at “normalising a specific type of identity” (McKenna 2010, p.19). Managers who passively succumb to such regulatory forces become “stencils” of the dominant management group.

However, the results indicate that middle-managers are unlikely to become stencils who simply passively appropriate dominant managerial ways of being. Nonetheless, the results suggest that managers may be tempted to unconsciously submit to regulatory forces and neglect or even renounce alternative subject positions (Alvesson and Wilmott 2002, Brown and Lewis 2011, McKenna 2010, Sturdy *et al.* 2006). Managers might, therefore, default to “soldiering”, that is, subjugating themselves to the seemingly benign discourses of their mentors, in the hope of securing aspirational identities (Beech *et al.* 2012, Sims 2003). Even facilitative experiences of being mentored can, on the basis of the results, be understood in such regulatory terms with managers being lured into adopting the meanings and the associated abject identity positions (Mavin and Williams 2015) offered by their mentors in the hope of eventual gain.

Similarly, managers’ mentoring of others, even when undertaken with a facilitative intent, can be seen as an attempt to socialise and position the recipients of their mentoring into compliant

and abject identity positions. Clearly it would be in such mentoring managers' interests to maintain the dominant hierarchical structures and available identity positions within their organisations to which they had themselves subjugated and were profiting from (Brown and Lewis 2011). Related processes might well be at work in the case of managers who use informal "reverse mentors", that is, as discussed, those who are mentored by those who are junior to them in the hierarchy. While such managers are explicitly inverting the traditional manager-as-expert identity to that of manager-as-learner, this can be seen as a covert tactic to encourage juniors' subordination to established organisational subjectivities, that is, a form of identity-regulation and repression to create "stencil" subordinates, whilst concurrently, strategically fostering their own position and status as progressive, learning-orientated, managers.

However, on balance, the research supports a more optimistic conclusion on mentoring as a process of identity formation. Mentoring is undoubtedly a relationship intertwined with power and the potential for identity-regulation is ever present. Nonetheless, managers, perhaps because of their privileged occupational positions, are unlikely to be mere stencils and are likely to resist being soldiers passively adopting the identity positions offered and sanctioned by established elites. In other words, managers will agentially resist forces for identity-regulation. The conclusion supported by the findings reported above is that managers' experiences of mentoring can be better understood through a strategist lens. The results suggest, though, that even this theoretical lens requires refinement. Managers cannot be considered to purposefully and unquestioningly pursue aspired, "functional" (Alvesson 2010, p.199), identity positions through exploiting mentoring relationships. Managers in fact compromise by working to achieve identity positions that align to some extent with organisational regimes while also being true to themselves (Alvesson 2010). The results

suggest that mentoring is used by managers to cultivate authentic, personally-valued and virtuous identity positions. In so doing, middle-managers are better positioning themselves for more senior roles, roles that typically require distinctive and creative ways of being.

Before proceeding to summarise the main contribution of this paper and to draw implications for HRD practice, two particular limitations of this research are acknowledged. Firstly, it is recognised that the participants are not representative of all middle-managers. The participants were well-educated, relatively recent MBA graduates who were generally working in larger organisations. Moreover, having achieved a degree of career success the participants are likely to have been strongly achievement-orientated individuals. However, the conclusions have relevance to other occupations, particularly professions in which effective performance can be considered as much, if not more, an outcome of particular ways of being as of cognitive capabilities or practical competencies.

Secondly, as with most research, the researchers have inevitably interpreted the data in specific ways and it must be acknowledged that the data could be interpreted through quite different theoretical lenses. However, it is believed that the results and conclusions offer robust, coherent, and insightful new interpretations of mentoring. Moreover, the inductive nature of the research, whereby both the significance of mentoring and of understanding mentoring from an identity perspective, emerged during the data analysis strengthens the credibility of the conclusions.

Contribution and Implications

To conclude, this paper has responded to a noted lacuna in established mentoring research, namely, that mentoring has been under-theorised (Allen *et al.* 2008, Garvey *et al.* 2012). The

paper has answered the research question of: to what extent can the traditionally elusive processes and ambiguous outcomes of mentoring be better understood in terms of identity formation? It has been established that mentoring can be effectively understood both in terms of providing opportunities for identity-work and in terms of forces for identity-regulation. Those in receipt of mentoring can now be considered as being either stencils of, or soldiers for, the powerful in organisations or, more likely, as being strategists capable of forging their own favoured subjectivities. On the basis of this contribution, practical implications for HRD in general and management education in particular can now be proposed.

Firstly, the potential of mentoring, particularly informal mentoring, as an approach to manager development can be affirmed. It is thus suggested that management educators should encourage learners to discern opportunities for themselves for informal mentoring and not merely from seniors but from peers and, in some circumstances, juniors. Secondly, management educators need to ensure that learners are made aware of the importance of affective, attitudinal, dispositions in effective management practice, that is, that management is understood as a state of being and not merely a process of thinking or doing. Thus, an enhanced role for critical reflexivity on the self in educational programmes is called for. Finally, perspectives from critical management studies can fruitfully be introduced to raise awareness of the pervasive, pernicious and corrosive force of organisational power on character. Managers will thus be enabled to comprehend more clearly the meaning of mentoring and use it wisely.

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