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Academic Paper

Can reciprocal mentoring as a progressive tool contribute to creating shared understanding of women's career equality challenges?

Sue Round

Abstract

This qualitative case study sought to explore if the experience of participating in a reciprocal mentoring programme between mixed gender pairs could influence shared understanding of women's career equality challenges within the case study organisation. Findings indicate that the reciprocal nature of the dialogue led to new understanding which includes themes that challenge some long held organisational assumptions. There are six main themes: a shift mentoring from perpetuative to progressive; women's congruence in the workplace; agentic leadership bias; organisational readiness for equality; and flexibility stigma and diversity as a business issue, not just a Human Resources issue.

Keywords

reciprocal mentoring, women's progression, meaning making,

Article history

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Introduction

The issue of female representation and slow progression through to senior positions is not new, however a raft of government backed reporting requirements e.g. The Davies Report (2014), The Hampton Alexander Review (2016) and the UK Gender Pay Gap (2018), have raised the profile of the problem. This has intensified focus within organisations who have been frustrated by the seeming lack of traction of multiple strategies to accelerate progress including sponsorship programmes, diversity training, women-only leadership programmes, women's networks, coaching and mentoring schemes etc. I was curious as to why such a flurry of well-meaning activity seemed to be having only limited material impact and as I began to engage in the literature it became clear to me that this was a complex and multifaceted problem, one that I really wanted to explore in depth, to understand more, and to bring a fresh perspective to.

The literature consisted of three main strands: Academic; Commercial Publications; and Government Reports. Commercial reports emerge regularly from consultancy firms and are widely read within organisations and have arguably fuelled the initiative industry, Government reports are largely data based and can act as organisational consciences as referenced above. The Academic literature uses data as a starting point, goes much deeper, is questioning and challenging of itself and explores the barriers to change. My exploration began to converge on three key themes. Firstly, the gendered organisation, (Moss Kanter,1977; Acker,1990; Hearn and Collinson,1997) Secondly, second generation bias, (Sturm, 2001; Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011,). Thirdly, women's career equality Kossek et al (2016). These themes seemed to describe a complex landscape from which an interesting dichotomy was emerging which can be summarised as fixing the women or creating organisations fit for women (Wittenberg-Cox, 2013; Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). A lot of activity thus far had arguably been focussed on the former; women focused initiatives often rooted in helping women to change, to fit in, arguably, to be more like men and with, as demonstrated by the data, limited success.

Several studies have challenged the effectiveness of mentoring and implied that unintentionally it is becoming part of the problem by perpetuating the status quo (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; McKeen and Bujaki, 2007; De Vries, 2011; Harvey, McIntyre, Heames and Moeller, 2009; Chandler and Kram, 2005; Webb and Eveline, 2006). McKeen and Bujaki (2007, p.218) specifically reviewed gender and mentoring research and concluded that mentoring can be a very powerful process but that currently it 'seems intended to assimilate women into the dominant masculine corporate culture'.

This is dubbed "the godfather approach" Ragins and Verbos (2009, p.92). Hackney and Bock (2000), argue that currently mentoring appears not to address entrenched relationships between male advantage and female disadvantage. Such studies suggest that whilst well intentioned, mentoring in its traditional form can be a contributing factor to the perpetuation of inequality by encouraging women mentees to learn and replicate 'what it takes to get on around here'. This line of reasoning provided me with the springboard for my research into the effectiveness of an emerging form of mentoring: 'Reciprocal Mentoring'. Table 1 frames its position alongside other forms of mentoring.

Table 1: Adapted from a comparison of types of mentoring summarised from Harvey, McIntrye, Heames, & Moeller, (2009)

	Traditional Mentoring	Reverse Mentoring	Reciprocal Mentoring
Definition	A relationship between a senior member and a junior member of an organisation that is created to help the junior member develop in the organisation (Kram1985).	A relationship between a senior member and a junior member of an organisation...created to help the senior member learn from the junior member	A non-hierarchical relationship specifically designed for the dyadic exchange of information and perspective
Emphasis on	Supporting career advancement for young employees Sharing information about how to navigate the organisation General guidance and support	Technical knowledge and current trends for senior executives Often focused on specific knowledge or skill	Deepening understanding of each other's perspective and sharing personal experience of a particular environment
Role of Mentors	Coaching Acting as a sounding board Increasing employee visibility Role modelling Sponsorship Counselling Sharing organisational history	Internet, technology assistance Knowledge of new tools	Sharing insights Creating mutual learning Psychological support Being a thinking partner Providing a safe and open space for dialogue
Best for acquiring	Existing organisational knowledge and career advice Visibility and access to networks Support for advancement	Technical knowledge of current trends and cross-cultural global perspectives. Cross generational relationships	A different view of the world Deeper understanding of another's point of view Increased organisational knowledge

In summary, reciprocal mentoring seeks to create the exchange of perspectives and mutual learning through participating in non-hierarchal dyads. I wanted to explore what impact this process could have on understanding women's career equality.

In the next section I will describe the methodology deployed, this will be followed by a discussion of the key findings and finally I will end this article with my conclusions in terms of the implications for mentoring.

Methodology

Table 1 differentiates reciprocal mentoring from its better-known cousins and highlights its potential to be deployed as a progressive tool to create new understanding. This approach aligns with my Social Constructionist paradigm; my belief that our experiences help to shape our perspective, which in turn creates new understanding and knowledge. I believe discourse with a dialogic mindset between individuals as described by Lawrence et al, (2019), opens minds. My own views have often been shaped by listening to and understanding how others experience the world. For example, whilst working in the retail industry I found that the time spent out of Head Office working alongside store staff offered invaluable insight into what was really needed to upskill staff and enabled me to create more meaningful development programmes as a result.

Taking a qualitative approach, this research explored the participants' felt experiences of the reciprocal mentoring programme and any shifts in understanding and empathy that occurred between mentors.

The Research

I conducted a qualitative case study over the life span of a reciprocal mentoring programme, involving nine mixed gender mentoring pairs. The case study organisation is an engineering multinational which has a strong bias towards technical expertise and experience, particularly in the operational parts of the business which continue to have primacy. It is typical within the industry in terms of gender representation in that it is male dominated, particularly at senior levels, with a standard negative correlation between the level of seniority and the percentage of women.

Semi-structured hour-long interviews were conducted with each of the mentors before the programme to gauge their individual perspectives and experiences. The male mentors were asked questions relating to navigating a successful career in the organisation, what they see as the barriers, their experiences of managing employees' careers, and their perceptions of career equality issues for women. The questions put to the female mentors were similar though nuanced, inquiring about their experiences of developing their careers in a male-dominated environment. After the reciprocal mentoring sessions had taken place, all participants were interviewed individually again. The second round of interviews were specifically designed to identify any shift in their understanding of women's career equality issues created through participating in the reciprocal mentoring programme. The female mentors were all in middle management roles and the male mentors were all senior managers.

The transcriptions of the interviews were then analysed using Thematic Analysis. This methodology is described by Braun and Clarke (2013, p.175) as "a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a data set." I followed the steps they recommend as laid out in Table 2 below:

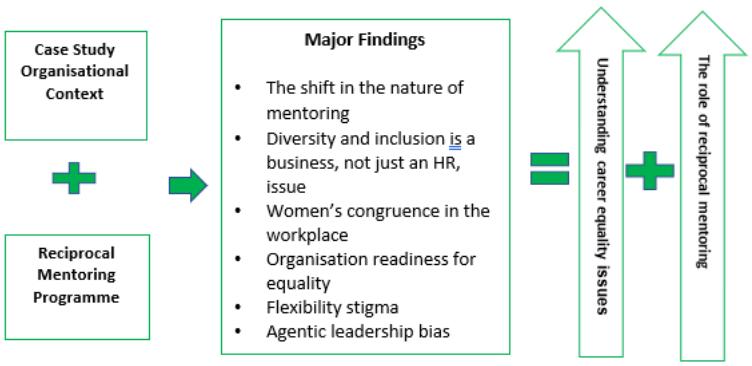
Table 2: Phases of Thematic Analysis. The Phases of Thematic Analysis applied to this case study augmented from Braun and Clarke, (2006, p. 87)

Phase	Description of process	Application in this study
1. Familiarising yourself with your data.	Transcribing the data (if necessary) reading and re-reading the data and noting down initial ideas.	Reading and re-reading through the verbatim notes from the interviews and focus group, in order to immerse myself in the data and absorb the tone and spirit of the dialogue. Then highlighting key words and phrases. On a third reading breaking down initial observations and reflections under the headings of the four questions, using different coloured sets of post-it notes to differentiate between the questions. Throughout this process I reflected on the conversations and how they had felt at the time.
2. Generating initial codes.	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	I searched for repeated words or phrases and in some cases the interpretation of words and began to create codes of what appeared interesting. I reflected on what was said and any associated meaning that emerged. I explored commonality amongst the participating women and amongst the participating men noting what, if anything, flowed across genders. I then created some initial codes. I was conscious and careful not to skim over comments and ensure that I absorbed the full richness to minimise the loss of context Bryman, (2001).
3. Searching for themes.	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each individual theme.	I then looked across all the codes to identify any emerging themes. I created theme maps and moved codes between them, with the aim of capturing anything important in relation to the overall research question explained in the Methodology section.
4. Reviewing themes.	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2) generating a thematic of the analysis.	I then identified themes and assessed which had enough data to justify being a theme. This led to some refinement of themes. During this phase, whilst the initial codes had created the foundations for themes, I re-read the transcripts and reflected again on the tone of the conversations to ensure I incorporated anything that may have got lost in the process.
5. Defining and naming themes.	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	I then interrogated each draft theme to ensure I had extracted the meaning within it. Having satisfied myself that I had found the essence of each theme I was able to name them.
6. Producing the report.	Selecting compelling extract examples relating the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.	Telling the story of my research, bringing it all together using analysis of the themes as the architecture.

Findings and Implications

Having completed the steps in table 2 above I was able to consolidate my major findings which are summarised in figure 1 below:

Figure 1: summary of major findings.



The findings contribute to knowledge in two important ways: new understanding of women's career equality challenges; and the role of reciprocal mentoring in the wider mentoring context. These are explored in more detail below. I then conclude with a point of view on the implications for mentoring practice.

New understanding of career equality challenges

There were 5 areas of new understanding that emerged for the mentors; whilst not all are entirely new concepts, they were new to the mentors and provided fresh insight into the case study organisation.

1. Women's Congruence in the workplace

The concept of congruence seemed significant for both groups of mentors. The female mentors reported to have been really surprised to have learned through the dialogue that they could be themselves and be valued. Throughout the pre-programme interviews these women had described how they felt under pressure to create a "work version" of themselves to fit in and succeed. This experience was both uncomfortable and tiring for them and the possibility that this was not necessary, in fact probably not appreciated, was both enlightening and liberating for them. This seemed to challenge the concept of the double-bind as articulated by Ibarra, Ely and Kolb (2013) which suggest women are either too "female" (incompetent) or too "male" (unlikeable and incongruent) and potentially offers a way through the dilemma they expressed. I am left questioning if it is perhaps the lack of congruence that is getting in the way for some women, which manifests as the adoption of a persona born out of a misconception of what was required. This seemed to resonate with the male mentors some of whom expressed a discomfort with a style adopted by women in the workplace which seemed incongruent with their experience of women outside of the workplace. They often referred to their wives, sisters, daughters and mothers through the post programme interviews in particular. This seemed to provide a useful reference point for their reflections.

For some of the female mentors the issue of self-doubt was raised particularly in the pre-programme interviews and I would suggest talking about this with a male mentor evolved both theirs and their mentors' thinking towards the realisation that it is more than good enough to be themselves. The findings have revealed that the female mentors in this study are struggling with being themselves and feeling as though they need to be adopting a persona, which they find tiring and unrewarding. The male mentors were experiencing an uncomfortable incongruence which was not based on women not being "womanly" but on them not being themselves. It would be interesting to explore this in other contexts to understand if there is a correlation between the ability to be congruent and progression for women.

2. Agentic leadership bias

During the research, a shared realisation across the mentor groups began to emerge. Whilst women's career equality seemed imbalanced within the case study organisation, a preference for a certain personality type at senior levels was having a bigger impact on diversity than gender bias. The Insights Discovery model Benton(2008) was frequently mentioned in my analysis, it is widely used within the case study organisation and has cultural traction. The model uses colours to differentiate personality styles, and red dominates within the senior executive leadership cadre. The underpinning characteristics of the red profile align well with the concept of agentic behaviours identified by Schuh, (2014); Eagly and Karau (2002) and hegemonic masculinity as described by Connell, (2005). Through their reflections some of the mentors of both genders were able to recognise under-representation of other types and thus the opportunity for proactively constructing more diverse teams incorporating style.

These suggestions reminded me of The nine Belbin team roles, Kidd and Belbin, (2012). This research demonstrated that the most successful teams were constructed of diverse individuals, with a balance of skills, intellect and personality. The "flaws of the Apollo team" identified during Belbin's research at Henley highlighted the risks associated with team homogeneity. This approach to diversity seems to have fallen out of favour in modern organisations, as the conversation has shifted towards the outward symbols of difference e.g. gender and ethnicity.

3. Organisational readiness for career equality

As I reflected on the above theme, I became curious as to why one such personality would be so highly regarded and almost exclusively present and thriving at senior levels in the case study organisation. The connection with colours expressing human development led me to explore Spiral Dynamics, which was initiated by Professor Clare Graves in the 1960s and developed into its current form by two of his students, Don Beck and Chris Cowan (Beck and Cowan, 2006). Their work resulted in a hierarchical model of eight levels (each describing a world view or meme, these world views can manifest themselves on an individual or a societal (organisational) level.

According to Beck and Cowan's (2006) explanation, unless an organisation moves beyond orange (enterprise) level and into the green (communitarian) level it is difficult for the concept of equality to gain traction. Arguably the business case for diversity would need to be compelling and unambiguous to mitigate for such underpinning drivers. I suggest understanding organisational readiness to embrace equality through an assessment of meme level would be useful for other organisations. This could enable organisations to better develop their diversity strategies and effectively target their interventions, as the data currently suggests that they generally result in limited progress. The case study organisation is at a critical transition point, I would argue moving towards the green meme and I have observed concurrently becoming much more open to the equality discussion.

4. Flexibility stigma

Whilst flexible working policies emerged strongly from both groups of mentors as a potential enabler of women's career equality, so did an associated stigma. The consequence of this as described was that men avoided participating in flexible schemes and the practice remained associated with women and a lack of commitment. The received wisdom within organisations appears to be that flexible working is a key driver of progress, what seemed to emerge here was that it could also have unintended negative consequences. This insight led me to explore the academic literature on the influence of flexible working on women's careers which highlights some risks :(Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017; Stone and Hernandez,2013; Williams, Blair and Bergdahl,2013; Hakim, 2006). . It would be interesting to survey populations across other organisations and sectors confidentially to inquire how flexible working is being experienced, including uptake, breakdown between genders, any associated stigma and consequences. Data is beginning to emerge on the impact of home working and home-schooling pressures on women's careers during

COVID -19. I would suggest that there is an opportunity for organisations to pay close attention to stigma and any other unintended consequences of flexibility as they explore their post pandemic working policies.

5. Diversity and inclusion is a business, not just an HR, issue

The findings reveal that, Diversity and Inclusion is very much seen as the responsibility of HR to drive. This appears in the case study organisation to be getting in the way of progress for two reasons. Firstly, that diversity was viewed as a moral rather than a business issue and, secondly, that the HR teams, as seen by their clients, were lacking the confidence or permission to hold the business to account in the discharge of organisational HR policies and processes. This point is raised by Wittenberg-Cox (2013, pg. 109) who argues that one of the consequences of 'diversity' being seen as the responsibility of HR departments and not seen as a business priority, is that it impedes progress. In my conversations with the male mentors, I observed that some of them, even though they were very senior leaders, had an expectation that HR were predominately responsible for creating the environment for career equality. Through their dialogue, for some of the mentors, there was an emerging recognition of the role they as senior leaders had to play. This concept of dual responsibility was discussed by Childs (2005, pg. 73) who references that "Workforce diversity cannot be delegated; it must be a partnership. Although the HR team plays the key staff role, total delegation from the top, without active involvement, is a recipe for failure."

The Role of Reciprocal Mentoring

Enabling a shift in perspective

As articulated in Table 1, 'Reciprocal Mentoring' is positioned differently from other forms of mentoring, with the principle of mutual exchange at its heart. As a social constructionist, I believe that our experiences help to shape our perspective and create new understanding and knowledge. In addition to an insight into women's career equality, I was interested in "the affect" Burr (2015, p. 225) (the felt experience and any associated empathy) of the mentoring process set without hierarchy. Tables 3 and 4 below summarise the shift in perspective in the mentors that I observed over the life of the mentoring relationship.

Table 3: Female mentors' perspective during reciprocal mentoring programme

Female mentors before the reciprocal mentoring programme	Female mentors after the reciprocal mentoring programme
Feeling like victims	Better informed, braver
Sense of helplessness- they could not control their circumstances	More ownership for their own issues and empowerment
Cornered – there was no way out	More in control and more supported
Lacking Choice- and that they should be grateful for opportunities	Prepared to be more demanding
Ignored – as though their views and opinions did not matter	Better understood and listened to
Limited – the amount of influence they had was finite	More confident about speaking up
Incongruent – as though they didn't belong	Less different, less isolated

Table 4: Male Mentors' perspective during reciprocal mentoring programme

Male mentors before the reciprocal mentoring programme	Male mentors after the reciprocal mentoring programme
On message - with a clear, collective view of the world	Reflective and less sure of their position
Guarded and wary of saying the wrong thing. Slightly defensive	Empathetic and motivated to understand more
Indulgent – duty bound to engage as part of their senior responsibilities	Attentive and interested
Confident that all the right things were happening	Embarrassed at how little they knew and slightly guilty at the part they are playing unwittingly
Polished and professional (informed and in control)	Less certain and more human
Slightly fatigued by the topic	Open-minded and inquisitive

In addition to the significant shifts outlined in Tables 3 and 4, both groups seemed more relaxed after the programme had completed, less corporate and more human. This surprised me and led me to reflect on the power of open dialogue. However, it is worth noting that the reciprocal mentors were volunteers drawn from a programme running within the case study organisation which arguably meant that they were predisposed to contributing, with some underlying curiosity.

The results of this study indicate that reciprocal mentoring might have broader application in other contexts where there is a desire to create shared understanding between diverse groups. There are many areas where difference is held as a barrier, rather than an opportunity to learn, for example in respect of: age, nationality, race, gender, sexuality.

Implications for Mentoring practice.

Traditional mentoring is widely practiced, reverse mentoring has emerged and is gaining traction as a progressive step with an opportunity to shift the flow of learning.

Reciprocal Mentoring is an emerging form, as described in Table 1, and could provide further evolution through its differentiating, prescribed mutuality of dialogue.

As mentoring practice evolves, highlighting the purpose, desired attributes, the process involved and the application of different types of mentoring could, I believe, enable more effective targeting of mentoring interventions. This is set out further in Table 5. This in turn could enhance the value gained for those participating, enabling mentors and interventions to be targeted to meet specific objectives.

Table 5: Distinctive mentoring definitions, extended from Harvey, McIntrye, Heames, & Moeller, (2009).

	Traditional Mentoring	Reverse Mentoring	Reciprocal Mentoring
Definition	A more senior person, guiding and supporting a more junior person	A more junior person imparting knowledge and skills to a more senior person	Non-hierarchical pairs engaged in mutual exchange
Purpose	Imparting advice, making recommendations, acting as a sounding board	Keeping senior managers up to date with new concepts and technologies and in touch with emerging generations	To share perspectives and create understanding between diverse populations
Process	Demarcation of roles: mentor talks and the mentee listens. Underpinned by the premise that the mentor knows best	Demarcation of roles, though hierarchically reversed, mentor learning from mentee with a defined outcome of knowledge or skill transfer	Equality of roles. Both participants talking and listening underpinned by the premise that both will learn perspective from each other
Attributes needed from participants	Experience, wisdom, patience, a desire to help	Willingness to share expertise and a desire to learn	Dialogic mindset, openness to new perspectives

Adopting this framework when devising mentoring programmes, including the selection of participants according to their needs and attributes could help to elevate mentoring further as a professional discipline and practice.

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About the authors

Dr Sue Round began her working life at British Airways as cabin crew and found her love of people development when she moved into the training department. Since then she has held senior Talent, Leadership Development and D&I roles across several FTSE 100 companies. In April 2021 she was appointed as a trustee of the CIPD. She is married with 3 grown up children and lives in London, where she indulges her love of running having completed 11 marathons.