

Making meaning through mentoring: Mentors finding fulfilment at work through self-determination and self-reflection

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Abstract

Organisations are increasingly concerned with promoting employee engagement. Research from positive psychology suggests that one key driver of engagement is experiencing work as meaningful. Organisations are therefore keen to understand how meaningful work is created. The present study conjectured that becoming a mentor might be one effective way of experiencing meaning at work. In-depth interviews were conducted with four experienced mentors and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand the impact that mentoring has on mentors. It was found that mentoring could indeed be a meaningful experience, enhancing work-related fulfilment. More detailed analysis revealed that meaning was engendered through a potent combination of self-determination (incorporating autonomy, relatedness and competence) and self-reflection, and a theoretical model was devised to reflect these findings. The paper offers recommendations for organisations, showing that mentoring relationships may not only benefit mentors (and mentees), but also organisations themselves.

Key words: meaning, purpose, mentoring, coaching, self-determination

Introduction

The importance of life being appraised as meaningful has long been recognised by philosophers, not least by Nietzsche (1888, p.468), who famously said that ‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.’ Nietzsche’s aphorism came to have particular resonance in the twentieth century, particularly for the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1963). Frankl endured intense suffering during the Holocaust. However, he also developed the powerful existential insight that those people who were relatively better able to withstand the traumas of war were those who had something to live for. As Frankl put it, ‘I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved’ (p.69). Insights such as these led Frankl to create logotherapy, an adjunctive therapy that ‘specifically addresses a patient’s strengths and his or her personal search for meaning and purpose in life’ (Southwick, Gilmartin, McDonough & Morrissey, 2006, p.163).

In more recent decades, this focus on meaning – and on its centrality to wellbeing – has been embraced by other academic fields, and nowhere more so than the emergent discipline of positive psychology. Scholars in this field, which can be defined as ‘the science and practice of improving wellbeing’ (Lomas, Hefferon & Ivtzan, 2014, p.ix), have argued that meaning in life is a vital component of happiness. Such scholars commonly distinguish between two ‘types’ of happiness:

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‘eudaimonic’ (i.e., fulfilment) and ‘hedonic’ (i.e., pleasure) with meaning regarded as a key aspect of the former. According to Ryff’s (1989) model of eudaimonia, referred to as ‘psychological wellbeing,’ meaning is one of six central components, alongside self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others. Similarly, Deci and Ryan’s (1985) ‘self-determination’ theory suggests that eudaimonic wellbeing depends upon the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs – competency, autonomy, and relatedness – which must be met for people to derive a sense of meaning in life (Antonovsky, 1999). However, although primarily associated with eudaimonic wellbeing, meaning has also been causally linked to dimensions of hedonic wellbeing, including positive affect and satisfaction with life (King, Hicks, Krull & Del Gaiso, 2006; Wong 2012).

In terms of theories of meaning, Janoff-Bulman and Yopyk (2004) hold that there are two key meaning-related needs: for comprehensibility (appraising life as coherent and congruent, with life ‘making sense’); and for significance (life being endowed with a sense of purpose). These two needs are central to most theories of meaning; as Mascaro and Rosen (2006, p.170) put it, ‘Theorists converge in defining existential meaning as a person’s having a sense of coherence [i.e., fulfilling the need for comprehensibility] and purpose [i.e., fulfilling the need for significance] about her or his life.’ Various models have consequently been developed exploring each of these two needs in further detail. For example, coherence has been conceptualised by Antonovsky (1993) as the extent to which one sees one’s world as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. Conversely, significance has been approached through concepts like ‘personal projects,’ defined as ‘extended sets of personally relevant action’ directed towards purpose-driven goals (Little, Lecl & Watkinson, 1992, p.502). In this model, the primary theoretical criterion for meaning is structural, in which the key to meaning is consonance of identity, values and action.

Within this emergent literature on meaning, a particularly strong area of inquiry has been the question of meaning at work. Within positive psychology, two new ‘sub-disciplines’ have emerged focusing on work, both of which have paid attention to meaning at work: ‘positive organizational behaviour’ (POB) (Luthans, 2002) and ‘positive organizational scholarship’ (POS) (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003). While these two paradigms overlap considerably, Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) argue that POB is more ‘organization-driven’ (enhancing employee performance to help the organisation thrive), whereas POS is more ‘employee-driven’ (improving organisational functioning to help employees flourish). These contrasting emphases are reflected in their respective definitions; Luthans (2002, p. 59) defines POB as ‘the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace’; conversely, Cameron and Caza (2004, p.731) define POS as ‘the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations.’ However, of course, these two emphases are not necessarily oppositional, but can be complementary and synergistic. For example, having engaged and flourishing employees means the organisation is more likely to prosper (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) and, as noted, both POS and POB have a keen focus on meaning at work.

POS and POB converge in conceptualising wellbeing at work primarily through the prism of engagement, defined as a ‘positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption’ (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p.295). Finding work meaningful is an important element of engagement; Crabb (2011) identifies the three psychological ‘drivers’ of engagement as: using one’s strengths; managing one’s emotions; and ‘aligning purpose’ (experiencing work as meaningful through consonance between one’s values/goals and those of the organisation). In terms of meaning at work, from a theoretical perspective there are a number of overlapping models, encompassing constructs like values, orientations, and identities (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Regarding values, Persson, Erlandsson, Eklund, and Iwarsson (2001) distinguish between concrete (tangible benefits, e.g., learning a skill), self-reward (work as intrinsically fulfilling), and symbolic value (significance attributed to an occupation by a person and/or their culture). Similarly,

Bellah et al. (1996) distinguish between three work 'orientations': a job (a means to an end); a career (a path to achievement); and a calling (an intrinsically fulfilling vocation). Finally, Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar (2010) delineate different positive work identities: the virtue perspective (work identities imbued with virtuous qualities); the evaluative perspective (self-regard connected to work identity); the developmental perspective (psychological growth linked to one's work); and the structural perspective (a harmonious relationship between work identity and other identities in life).

From a POS perspective, the importance of work being meaningful derives from the idea that wellbeing is a substantive good; since meaning is a vital component of wellbeing, then meaningful work is inherently desirable. Indeed, when employees are engaged in meaningful work, they report greater hedonic and eudaimonic happiness (Kamdron, 2005). From a POB perspective, the 'buy-in' for organisations is that employee engagement (through finding work meaningful) can enhance organisational performance, since engaging workplaces attract the best applicants (Smith, 2013); need to offer less remuneration (employees make cost-benefit trade-offs between engagement and wages; Helliwell & Huang, 2010); have less sickness and ill-health (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008); and have more productive workers (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2003). Indeed, it is reported that meaningful work is the job feature employees have come to value above all else (Cascio, 2003). So, a key question can be, what can be done to make work meaningful? Whilst not all work can be equally meaningful (Grant, 2007), efforts are being made to explore what organisations can do to increase the meaning quotient across all roles. One such approach is 'job crafting,' involving physical and/or cognitive changes in the way people approach their job (Wrzesniewski, 2003), for instance through increasing employees' sense of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Similarly, career counselling involves quasi-therapeutic activities to help people construe their work as more meaningful (Dik, Duffy & Eldridge, 2009); these activities can include 'perspective-shifting, such as connecting one's work activities to larger narratives of meaning (e.g., serving a particular ideal) (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

Another potential route to engendering meaning at work is through the facilitation of mentoring relationships. Mentoring can be defined as:

An intense interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced colleague (the mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (the mentee) in which the mentor provides support, direction and feedback regarding career plans and personal development (Russell & Adams, 1997, p.12).

In the work arena, it is almost taken as axiomatic that the process is beneficial to the mentee, or is at least as effective as other leadership programmes (Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang & Avolio, 2011). Indeed, Kram (1985) suggests that effective mentoring relationships can lead to enhanced sense of competence and effectiveness in the mentee. Due to the close, exchange nature of the mentoring relationship, it is reasonable to conjecture that benefits are also reciprocally experienced by the mentor. However, there is a distinct shortage of research into the experience of the mentor, particularly in terms of the *meaning* that mentors might derive from the experience (Ghosh & Reio, 2013).

There is an emergent literature around costs/rewards experienced by mentors; however, this does not cover meaning in any depth, and furthermore is somewhat equivocal in its assessments of the benefits. For example, discussing mentorship in the context of medical practice, Platz and Hyman (2013, para. 23) argue that, due to time and other demands, any potential psychological benefits are insufficient motivation, and that 'financial compensation and/or professional recognition are required.' Long (1997) takes an even more critical perspective, arguing that under various conditions, such as inadequate planning and facilitation of the partnership, mentoring 'can actually be detrimental to the mentor, mentee or both' (p.115). Indeed, in a systematic review of mentorship, Erich, Hansford and Tennant (2004) found that 35% of studies reported *only* positive outcomes for the mentor, and less than half (48%) found *some* benefits. This does of course mean a slim majority of papers did find some benefits. Among studies focusing on an education context, the most prominent were:

collegiality/networking (21% of studies), self-reflection and/or reappraisal of practices/beliefs/values (19.5%), professional development (17%), and personal satisfaction/reward/growth (16.4%). Conversely, among business studies, the most prominent were: collegiality/networking (7.9%); career satisfaction/motivation/promotion (7.3%); improved skills/job performance (6.6%); and pride/personal satisfaction (6.6%).

Such systematic findings are noteworthy. However, the literature in this area has arguably yet to benefit from the insights of the emergent field of positive psychology, particularly in terms of its conceptual insights regarding wellbeing generally and meaning especially. As identified above, meaning is of key importance within positive psychology, being a fundamental component of engagement, and of wellbeing more broadly. However, the notion of mentoring facilitating a sense of meaning has hitherto been largely absent from mentoring studies (although one might argue that the construct is implicitly present in outcomes like personal satisfaction/reward/growth). This would seem to be a significant omission, since research on comparable prosocial activities such as volunteering suggest that one of the key benefits of such activities may be enhanced meaning at work, and in life generally (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Thus, the current research aims to explore the conjecture that this experience might be undertaken because it is appraised as meaningful, and more broadly attempts to understand the experience of individuals who voluntarily help others in the context of a mentoring relationship.

Methodology

Since this is an exploratory study of participants' lived experiences of mentoring, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative enquiries do not set out to test a particular hypothesis or theory, but to explore and understand 'what it is like' for participants to experience particular situations (Willig, 2000, p.9). This was the case here; although the research was driven by an a priori conjecture, derived from the positive psychology literature (namely, that mentoring may be undertaken because it is generative of a sense of meaning), the aim was not to 'prove/disprove' this 'hypothesis,' but simply to enquire into its possibility. In terms of specific methodologies, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) – conducted from a social constructivist perspective (Charmaz, 2007) – was selected as most appropriate. IPA allows for detailed examination of people's lived experience, looking in particular at significant events or processes in people's lives (Smith et al., 2009, p.1). It is reasonable to surmise that a mentoring relationship could be a 'significant' part of a person's working life. To ensure that this was indeed the case, participants were selected who had formed more than one mentoring relationship and had mentored for more than two years.

Moreover, IPA was chosen because it is arguably uniquely placed to not only facilitate an enquiry into participants' experience of mentoring, but because it allows researchers to understand their experiences in the context of existing psychological literature. As Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006, p.102) put it, IPA has two complementary commitments: the 'phenomenological requirement to understand and 'give voice' to participants' concerns; and the 'interpretative requirement to contextualize and 'make sense' of these claims and concerns from a psychological perspective.' Thus, while providing space for participants to discuss their subjective experiences of mentoring, the method allows us to interrogate and appraise this data using relevant literature (which in this case was the broad field of positive psychology, and more specifically, work in the sub-disciplines of POS and POB pertaining to meaning). Thus, IPA requires interpretive engagement with the data; therefore it follows the result is something that is co-created by both interviewee and researcher. As such, the research can be broadly identified as social constructionist in nature (Charmaz, 2007). More specifically, in this case, the researchers took a 'critical realist' epistemological position, which recognises that, although knowledge is culturally-situated and co-produced, it is legitimate and possible to 'preserve a scientific attitude towards social analysis' (Layder, 1993, p.50). Thus, while striving for objectivity and

truthfulness, it was recognised the researchers' situated perspective would influence the design, implementation, analysis and outcomes of the research. In qualitative research, this recognition is addressed through a commitment to reflexivity (Cutcliffe, 2003). Consequently, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This enabled them to reflect upon how the responses of the interviewees may have been shaped through their interviewing style, body language and rapport building. Moreover, since one of the researchers was an experienced coach, there was a risk of inadvertently ascribing benefits to the mentoring relationships; efforts were duly made to adhere fairly rigidly to the interview script. Indeed, reflexivity notwithstanding, the researchers still hoped to uncover aspects of the 'reality' of mentoring as experienced by the mentors, as per the 'realism' aspect of critical realism.

Participants

Consistent with IPA methodology, data were gathered via a small number (four) of individuals with reasonably homogenous experience (a homogenous group helps in focusing the analysis and conclusions; Smith et al., 2009). Inclusion criteria were that the individual had voluntarily mentored, had done so on more than one occasion and for a period which extended beyond two years. It was hoped that this level of experience would provide rich data, and also help ensure that mentoring constituted a *significant* experience for these participants (which, as noted above, is generally deemed one of the criterion for conducting IPA). The four individuals were identified via the researchers' own network, but were unknown to researchers prior to participating. Each participant gave their time voluntarily, and they were not paid for their participation.

Pseudonym	Age	Current role	No of years mentoring
Karen	47	HR Director	20+ years voluntary (part of employment contract)
Jack	61	Self-employed business consultant	10+ years voluntary
Alan	62	Self-employed business consultant	20+ years voluntary and paid (part of employment contract)
Jenny	52	Self-employed mentor, coach and teacher	15+ years voluntary and paid

Table 1: Interviewee profiles

Jack, Alan and Jenny had most recently been undertaking voluntary mentoring through an unpaid university mentoring programme. Karen's experience, entirely based within an organisational setting, was therefore potentially the most different to the other interviewees. However, data analysis revealed considerable coherence and consistency across the four interviewees in terms of their experience and the impact that mentoring had made on them.

Interview procedure

Interviewees were invited to participate via an introductory email which explained the aims and the objectives of the research. Prior to the interview, each individual was asked to prepare specific examples of their mentoring experience, thereby creating an opportunity for them to reflect upon their experience (without necessarily needing to come up with a response in the interview itself). During the interview, the researcher followed a semi-structured interview format to ensure consistency across the four interviews. Interviews lasted 45-70 minutes, and were recorded with the permission of the interviewee.

Analysis

Each interview was transcribed, and then read and reread a number of times prior to the analysis in order to understand the context and get an overall feel for the interview. Interviews were then analysed separately according to the process outlined in Smith et al. (2009). Firstly, transcripts were analysed line by line to identify relevant descriptive content, including emotional responses. The next analytic step involved identification of metaphors, useful quotes, and linguistic patterns such as the repetition of particular words/phrases in order to identify significant experiences. Transcripts were then scrutinized to identify emergent themes. Once all four interviews were analysed, these emergent themes were grouped together to form superordinate themes (i.e., constructs which apply to each participant in the study but which may manifest themselves in different ways) (Smith et al., 2009, p.166).

Results

There were considerable commonalities across the interviews, with many themes found in all four; this may have been due to the homogeneity of the sample, or a result of questions being consistent across the four interviews. This commonality and association across transcripts resulted in a wealth of indicative quotes, which are used below to illustrate the emergent themes.

Superordinate theme	Sub-theme	Prevalence	
		No. of interviews	No. of occurrences
Self-discovery and growth	Feelings of self-worth	4	12
	Helping my self-reflection	3	10
	Learning from others	3	13
Feeling good through doing good	My parents showed me how	3	4
	Vicarious enjoyment	4	22
	Using your experience in helping others	3	18
Managing a purposeful journey	Autonomy is important to me	4	23
	Seeing them mature and grow	4	12

Table 2: Themes and subthemes prevalence table

Self-discovery and growth

All the mentors suggested that mentoring provided an opportunity for self-discovery and growth, either through exposure to a younger worker with different skills or through a process of self-reflection on their own skills and experience. Self-discovery was underpinned by enhanced self-worth which the mentors experienced when asked to give their time and contribute to another person’s development. In other words, participants enjoyed a feel-good factor when they realised that their experience was of value to others, a feeling that was both empowering and motivating, for example:

Karen – I felt valued. I felt that I was being sought out for something that I knew. You’re not always sure if you’re doing a good job. But if people are asking you then you think, well I am.

Alan – *(There comes) a great sense of satisfaction that being around for 50 years has a value and a worth... You realise it's useful for people getting into it for the first time.*

At the start of the mentoring experience, as part of their preparation, the mentors typically reflected back over their own experience to identify which skills and experiences might be of value to the mentees. This provided an opportunity for sense-making; of their career to date and of the various roles they play in life, one said:

Jack– *I've learned what I'm good at. So if you think you're good at mentoring, why am I good at mentoring? I've got an interest in people that doesn't go away. I have an amazing attention to detail which is just in my nature. I actually do care about what happens.*

Mentoring also provided an opportunity for mentors to learn from the mentees. For instance, working with motivated, young individuals early in their career provided an opportunity to build a language and communicate in a more confident manner with clients of that generation. In three cases, this learning was transferable to other work in the mentors' portfolios, for example:

Alan- *A lot of the work I do is with early 30 year olds. When I mentor [university students] I learn a lot about what they know, how they talk, their assumptions and that they don't necessarily have the commercial knowledge.*

For the mentors working primarily in a self-employed capacity, mentoring provided a source of feedback which may not have been forthcoming in other areas of their work. For Karen, the employed mentor, self-worth was enhanced in an area in which she personally valued, making the mentoring particularly significant:

Karen- *I'm not one of those people who doesn't want to share things. So in helping others there's a real sense of satisfaction, that you're doing something worthwhile.*

In summary, mentoring provided positive reinforcement for the mentor, boosting their self-worth, self-efficacy and confidence.

Feeling good through doing good

A second superordinate theme was 'doing good' (i.e., acting in a way that was congruent with one's values and morals), and, through this, feeling strong positive emotions. The emotions were typically those of satisfaction, joy and pride. In addition, it was important to all mentors that their contribution was measurable – not necessarily by others, but by themselves. They needed to understand how they impacted the individual and the result. When they knew their impact was positive, the emotions experienced were often intense, as in the case of Karen:

Oh I was crying! It was 'oh my little baby!'. I'm welling up thinking about it. ... I thought you've got your career made. All of these people will want you in their business and can see confidence, maturity, you know all the things you wouldn't necessarily expect in a graduate.

Many of the mentors applied empathy to better understand what the mentee was experiencing and how different things were for younger people coming in to the workplace, for example:

Jack - *Looking back over my career and I've got 3 children of my own who are all grown up and just realise the challenges that young people today are faced with. I thought maybe it would be a worthwhile thing to do. It was incredibly rewarding because you saw the talent and you could see the potential.*

Whilst it was not always clear what underpinned the motivation to give back, parental role modelling may have provided an impetus. Three of the mentors mentioned the strong impact their parents had had on them in their early career – either by mentoring them or through example, such as by being a “glass half-full person” (Jack). These influences seemed to create a positive attitude to work and to giving. For instance, Jack spoke of the on-going inspiration he gained from his mother.

Jack - I'm usually incredibly trusting, a caring and kind person and that's not just with my (mentees) and my family, that's with anybody. I think about carrying people's suitcases up a flight of stairs or on the tube and if they are struggling, or picking up a baby's pram to help a bit. Those are values I think in helping others... Those values came from my mother. And she's been in a wheelchair for 20 years. She's a shadow of her former self but her spirit and her humour is unbelievable.

Whilst first undertaking mentoring may have been driven by values, vicarious experience of success reinforced the mentoring as a rewarding endeavour. Mentors felt they were “lucky” (Alan) in their careers and in having the opportunity to apply their experience to help others. These experiences sustained them through other aspects of their work. For instance, in Karen's case, she would seek out her mentee for discussions when she was dealing with something “horrible” because these discussions were “a warm kind of task,” offering a different experience and a sense of satisfaction. In short, emotions resulting from mentoring were positive, nourishing and sustaining in a way that reinforced the notion that giving back is a good thing and feels good.

Managing a purposeful journey

The final superordinate theme highlighted the importance of being able to manage an effective relationship and take an individual through a journey to a successful outcome. This theme highlighted not only relationships with mentees and how they develop over time, but also the importance of mentors determining how they work with others. There was a clear sense of autonomy in who the mentors chose to work with, in how they worked with the mentees, and how they handed over the reins once the journey had come to a natural conclusion:

Jenny - What I like is that I'm never pushed or pulled. It [mentoring] is always on my own terms.

At the very start of the mentoring relationship it was critical to the mentor to have the freedom to choose who to work with. In particular, the mentors seemed keen on prospective mentees who would increase the chance of making an impact and being successful; i.e., mentees with most potential. Mentees in turn were described as “very, very bright” (Jenny), “very switched on” (Jack), “very, very assertive and entrepreneurial” (Alan). When mentees had less potential, they struggled to keep the momentum and experienced less satisfaction.

Jack- One [mentee] was very difficult. He had a number of mitigating circumstances that made him almost unemployable. In the end he went off the radar and while you can check up, you've got to let them work at their own pace, because it's their lives, it's not mine. I said that I didn't feel I could do any more for that individual, I didn't want to be a counsellor.

Although the relationships were formalised through contracting sessions with the mentees, the mentors set the ground rules and determined how the pairing worked. As the relationship matured, the role of the mentor changed and the success of the relationship depended on how far the mentee had ‘matured’:

Jack - I was very mindful that you couldn't be a father, you couldn't tell them what to do, you can't do that as a mentor. You've sort of got to be just there to support and motivate them until they find their own way through.

The relationships with the mentee framed a journey and provided a sense of progression for both mentor and mentee. Most importantly, this journey was all the more meaningful when the mentor could take charge of the relationship until such time as the relationship became that of peer to peer. For Jenny, the mentoring was complete when the mentee became a mentor themselves:

Jenny - She's now a peer and it's gone full circle. I can see in the future she'll be referring work to me ... It's organic almost.

Discussion

The findings provide a unique insight into the benefits that mentoring can deliver to mentors. In line with the conjecture that drove the research, mentoring appeared to be a meaningful activity which participants found to be very fulfilling. In particular, mentoring appeared to engender a sense of meaning through facilitating a potent combination of: (a) self-determination, and (b) self-reflection. Together, the reciprocal interaction of these twin products of the mentoring experience served to create an on-going experience that was generally both rewarding and conducive to psychological growth (without necessitating the type of existential soul-searching that can be detrimental to wellbeing; Wong, 2012). Thus, it might be said that, rather than searching for meaning, participants were *living* meaning. These two outcomes will be discussed in turn below, after which we introduce a theoretical model of mentoring that brings the two together in a process-oriented way. Finally, the wider implications of the findings for the disciplines of positive organisational scholarship (POS) and positive organisational behaviour (POB) will be discussed.

Self-determination

As noted above, self-determination theory suggests that eudaimonic wellbeing results from three key psychological needs being satisfied: relatedness, autonomy, and competency (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Mentoring seemed to be particularly effective at achieving all three, as it was portrayed as: (a) inherently relational; (b) characterised by autonomy; and (c) conducive to competency (especially in terms of self-efficacy and self-worth); these will be discussed in turn. The first element is the most self-explanatory: mentoring inherently involved developing a close relationship with another person. As a wealth of literature within positive psychology (and other fields) attests, close relationships are central to wellbeing, in hedonic (Oishi, Akimoto, Richards & Suh, 2013) and particularly in eudaimonic terms (Ryff, 1989; Wong, 1998). Indeed, transcending one's narrow self-identity and contributing to something 'larger' than oneself – such as a mentoring dyad – is seen by Seligman (2011) as *the* fundamental driver of meaning. Here there are clear parallels between mentoring and other activities that have been found to be fulfilling, like volunteering (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). In terms of the second component of self-determination, autonomy, mentors suggested that mentoring typically allowed autonomy, which was likewise greatly valued. However, at times it did not, during which they appeared to value the experience less. This last point has implications for organisations who may wish to facilitate mentoring, as discussed further below.

Finally, the third element of self-determination, competency, was very well-served by the mentoring experience. Specifically, participants suggested that mentoring enhanced two key qualities that are both indicative of competency: self-worth and self-efficacy. Firstly, being asked to mentor, and then applying their life experience to help others, was reported to engender feelings of self-worth. Using Dutton et al.'s (2010) model of positive work identities, it would appear that mentoring can facilitate at least two such types of identity: the virtue perspective (work identity is imbued with virtuous qualities, like wisdom); and the evaluative perspective (self-regard linked to work identity). Similarly, as per Persson et al.'s (2001) value schema, being asked to take on such a role would arguably lend symbolic value to one's work. Mentoring also built the mentor's self-efficacy, i.e., their belief in their ability to execute tasks (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Thus, in terms of Dutton et al.'s

identities model, this outcome of mentoring could be seen as facilitating the developmental perspective (psychological growth linked to one's work), while in terms of Persson et al.'s values, it could be viewed as enabling concrete values (tangible benefits, e.g., learning a skill).

Self-reflection

Crucially, mentoring appeared to exert its positive effect through the way self-determination was allied to a second key process: self-reflection. It was not simply that mentoring allowed the various components of self-determination to be satisfied; the experience also prompted self-reflective activities that appeared to offer opportunities for participants to engage in sense-making and to deepen the sense of purpose that they felt through mentoring. While Erich et al. (2004) also found that self-reflection could be an important aspect of mentoring in their systematic review, this was only in an education context, and did not feature prominently in studies focusing on business, unlike the present study. Here the findings corroborate models of reflection which identify this as a crucial element of psychological growth. For example, Korthagen and Vasalos' (2005) five stage ALACT framework holds that professional (and personal) reflection often proceeds in five cyclical stages: Action; Looking back on one's actions; Awareness of key aspects; Creating alternative methods of action; and Trial of alternative/adapted actions; then back to Action, and so on. Their model further suggests that this on-going cycle of reflection can lead to progressively deeper and more personal *levels* of reflection, reflecting on: the environment (one's situation generally); behaviours (in a relational dyad, such as mentoring); competence (the knowledge / experience one possess in this context); identity (the type of person one is becoming through one's work); and deepest of all, mission (the existential purpose that one's activities are serving).

It appeared that participants here went through similar processes of reflection, both in terms of cyclical processes of trial and error (the ALACT stages), and progressively deep considerations of the role of mentoring in their lives. In this respect, participants suggested that feedback – a key aspect of the ALACT model – was crucial. Participants needed to be able to gauge their progressive impact upon mentees in order to legitimately receive a boost to self-worth and self-efficacy. This may suggest that, even when undertaking acts of giving, people need to know that they are accomplishing something. In his model of flourishing, Seligman (2011) includes undertaking a skill for its 'own sake' as a central aspect. However, in the case of the mentors, engaging in mentoring for its own sake was clearly not enough; delivering results was what produced satisfaction and gave meaning to the interaction.

So, in summary, mentoring appeared to facilitate a sense of meaning – and thereby feelings of eudaimonic wellbeing – through a combination of self-determination and self-reflection. This combination is reflected in a theoretical model, shown in figure 1 below, which illustrates this process of meaning-making through mentoring. We have already suggested that mentoring satisfies the self-determination needs of relatedness and autonomy. However, its impact was especially felt in terms of the third component of self-determination, namely competency, and in particular through enhanced self-worth and self-efficacy (both of which are indicative of competency). Thus, in the model, being asked to mentor can boost self-worth and efficacy which, alongside relatedness and autonomy, characterise the mentoring relationship and engender self-determination. Then, as the mentoring relationship develops, mentors engage in an on-going process of reflection, which drives a process of sense-making and self-development. Together, these on-going cyclical processes combine to create and reinforce a sense of meaning in the mentoring relationship.

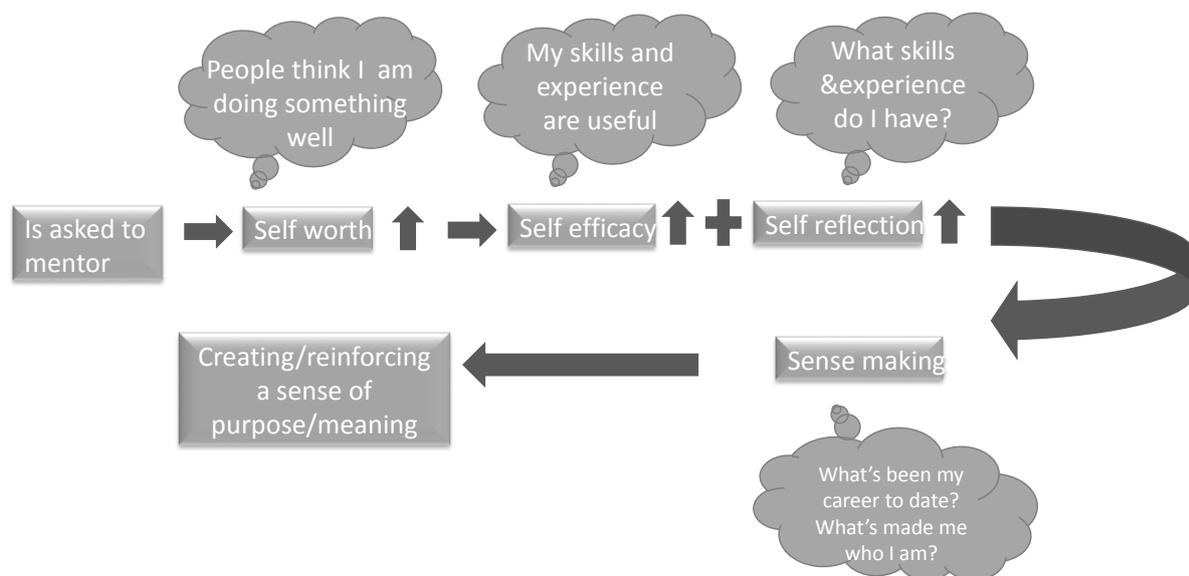


Figure 1: Meaning making through mentoring

This process of meaning-making therefore helped to derive a sense of meaning from the mentoring relationship and generally engendered a sense of wellbeing – at work, and in life more broadly. Consistent with the wellbeing literature in positive psychology (and related fields), it could be said that this meaning-making process led in particular to eudaimonic wellbeing (i.e., fulfilment) (see e.g., Ryff, 1989, and Seligman). However, participants also experienced hedonic-type wellbeing (e.g., positive affect, and feelings of satisfaction) from these meaning-making activities. Thus, as Biswas-Diener, Kashdan and King (2009) point out, the common construction of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing as distinct ‘types’ of wellbeing may be somewhat untenable. Fulfilment (i.e., meaning-making) may often be experienced as pleasurable, which in turn may generate further efforts towards finding fulfilment, in a virtuous upward spiral (King et al., 2006). This possibility aligns with Fredrickson’s (2000) ‘broaden-and-build’ theory, in which positive emotions are seen as enhancing people’s ‘openness’ to their surroundings; in turn, such openness may encourage them to become part of ‘something bigger’ (e.g., a mentoring relationship), which Seligman (2011) suggests is the defining feature of meaning. In sum, it appeared that mentoring, as a meaning-making activity, was conducive to wellbeing, both in hedonic and eudaimonic terms.

Implications for mentors and organisations

The notion that mentoring can be a rewarding experience for mentors has implications both for potential mentors and for organisations that might be minded to facilitate mentoring relationships. Here we can see the potential synergy between the two sub-disciplines within positive psychology that pertain to work, POS (Cameron et al., 2003) and POB (Luthans, 2002). As highlighted above, POS is more ‘employee-driven,’ focusing on what organisations can do to help employees flourish (Cameron & Caza, 2004). From this perspective, mentoring is valuable because it can enhance the wellbeing of mentors, as outlined above (not to mention the wellbeing of mentees; Lester et al., 2011). On the other hand, POB is more ‘organisation-driven,’ concerned with employee wellbeing to the extent that it enhances organisational performance (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). However, as argued above, these two perspectives are not necessarily oppositional. If employees are engaged – one of the drivers for which is finding work meaningful (Crabb, 2011) – this produces outcomes that are desirable to the organisation, including: lower staff turnover and work-related stress (Dik & Duffy, 2009), and more committed and productive workers (Harter et al., 2003). As organisations continue to struggle to increase staff engagement levels (Gallup, 2013), those providing opportunities for meaningful work may well have an advantage over their competitors.

Whilst not all jobs may be equally meaningful (Grant 2007), it may be possible to enhance a job to incorporate meaningful aspects. As this paper has shown, facilitating mentoring relationships may be a particularly effective way to do this. Beyond mentoring per se, organisations can learn from the elements of mentoring that participants found fulfilling, with the aim of trying to incorporate these into other dimensions of working life. Historically, job design has been a top down process, but the experience of the mentors suggests that autonomy, above all else, must be incorporated in day to day working practices to ensure individuals have the scope to shape and interpret the work that they do. Job crafting is a bottom up, employee-driven job design process in which employees can change parts of their jobs to improve the fit between the job and the employee's abilities and preferences (Berg, Dutton & Wrzesniewski, 2008). When individuals are able to craft their jobs, this not only enhances employee well-being, but also productivity and performance are improved (Tims, Bakker & Derks, 2013). Likewise, it is in the organisation's interest to enable staff to experience positive emotions at work through job enhancement activities such as mentoring; a meta-analysis of workplace wellbeing found that positive emotions such as joy and contentment resulted in greater commitment to the organisation (Harter et al., 2003). This suggests that organisations who can provide more opportunities for employees to experience such emotions – not only through mentoring but other activities – will accrue benefits themselves, for example in terms of staff performance.

However, there are some caveats here. The findings indicate that organisation-based mentoring programmes ought to build in flexibility in how the relationships are first established avoiding, wherever possible, the practice of matching individual mentors with mentees. This is consistent with Johnson (2007), who found that formal mentoring programmes are largely ineffective compared with informal or organic relationships. Organisations also need to be wary of being over prescriptive by defining behaviours through tightly worded mission/value-statements. To do so may be self-defeating if there is an expectation that each individual has to subscribe to each and every aspect of behaviour; as seen above, a crucial element of the success of mentoring is the provision of autonomy, one of the core components of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 1985). This caveat applies too outside the mentoring arena; for example, corporate social responsibility outreach programmes, in which organisations work with local communities, need to incorporate an element of consultation with employees to achieve maximum benefits from the experience; perhaps the mantra needs to be “ask first” before imposing such initiatives.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

There are limitations to the current research, with recommendations here to address these. Firstly, a key point to mention concerns the selectivity of the data. A commitment to reflexivity in qualitative research means that one recognises the extent to which one's findings are shaped by one's methodological choices, such as the selection of interview questions (Cutcliffe, 2003). The interviews here focused on the most memorable or enjoyable mentoring experiences, and did not specifically look at less successful mentoring relationships (although some such relationships were discussed by participants). Bearing in mind that Erich et al. (2004) found that less than half of the studies on mentoring they reviewed reported benefits for the mentor, more work is also needed to explore factors that make mentoring an unrewarding experience. Moreover, participants in the current study were those who mentored voluntarily, and only one mentored within an organisation. There is therefore a question as to whether similar meaningful experiences could be derived when mentoring is imposed as part of everyday work. Organisation-based mentors may be more restricted in how they work, who they work with and what they are required to deliver. Therefore, experiences may not always be typical across all forms of mentoring. Further research on other types of mentoring relationships, particularly in organisations where there is an element of prescription or even coercion in relation to mentoring, will be crucial to better understanding the specific conditions under which mentoring is a rewarding experience.

It is furthermore important to consider that, even in the case of positive reports of mentoring, as in the present study, there may be a performative element to these reports. That is, from the post-positivist perspective that characterises most qualitative research, it is recognised that data – such as participants’ interview responses – do not provide an objective window onto a pre-given world, but to some extent create the world of which the participants speaks (Charmaz, 2007). As such, one must bear in mind that participants may have been motivated to *portray* their mentoring experience as fulfilling – both for impression management purposes (i.e., making a favourable impression on the interviewer), and for their own narrative purposes (i.e., constructing their own life as being fulfilling) – regardless of the ‘actual’ experience of mentoring. However, this is not to invoke an air of mistrust. The researchers here favour a critical realist approach (Layder, 1993), which is usually characterised by a ‘double hermeneutics’ of both faith and suspicion (Ricoeur, 1981). This means both trusting that the data is a true (if partial) reflection of a person’s experience (a hermeneutics of faith), but also acknowledging that there is also an element of construction and performance in how this is conveyed (a hermeneutics of suspicion). As such, even while allowing for motivated positive portrayals of mentoring, it can be seen that mentoring has the potential to be a highly rewarding experience for mentors, and that organisations would do well to facilitate these types of relationships.

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