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**Understanding experiences of engagement mentoring for  
'disaffected' young people and their student mentors: problems of  
data analysis in qualitative research.**

***Helen Colley***

the Manchester Metropolitan University

Paper presented in the Post-16 Special Interest Group Symposium:

***Researching learners' experiences and meanings within post-compulsory  
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# **Understanding experiences of engagement mentoring for 'disaffected' young people and their student mentors: problems of data analysis in qualitative research.**

**Helen Colley**

the Manchester Metropolitan University

## **Abstract**

*This paper presents a reflexive account of recently completed qualitative research into mentoring relationships between 'disaffected' 16-19 year olds and university students. Despite the current popularity of mentoring for socially excluded youth, research has been dominated by quantitative psychological studies and evaluation projects, with little attempt to explore the meanings that participants bring to the processes of mentoring. It has also tended to disembed mentoring from its social, economic and political contexts. Addressing these gaps created challenges for the researcher, particularly in analysing the data and representing the findings. Interviewing teenagers with emotional and learning difficulties generated sometimes limited data. The more articulate and constructed views of the mentors often threatened to marginalise the mentees' experiences as the data was transformed. These experiences are considered in relation to issues of cultural capital. Using unconventional data analysis techniques led to a new theoretical understanding of mentoring as a process of producing specific forms of cultural capital ('employability') in both mentors and mentees. It also reveals how researchers need to be conscious of their own power to construct or reject respondents' cultural resources as cultural capital. The paper concludes that the use of inappropriate research methods reinforces this power and limits the quality of research.*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I will draw on some experiences from my recently-completed doctoral research project to explore problems of data analysis I encountered, and a variety of techniques I utilised in transforming the data. My research focused on the experiences of two sets of learners involved in mentoring – young 'disaffected' people being mentored by university undergraduates – and the meanings they brought to and developed through mentoring.

The paper begins with my explanation of the type of mentoring involved, and the research concerns that this practice posed for me. This includes the identification of particular gaps in existing knowledge about mentoring that I wished to address. After briefly indicating the nature of the research project and the critical interpretive approach I took, I go on to explore the particular difficulties of making sense of the interview data I had generated with mentors and mentees, giving illustrative examples of the results of different techniques of analysis I applied. I evaluate the texts I produced at different stages of the research from the perspective of how I presented issues of cultural capital through them. A case study of one particular mentoring relationship is discussed to show how I finally developed a theoretical framework for understanding mentoring as a process of emotional labour to produce specific and gendered forms of cultural capital in both mentor and mentee.

However, the struggle to make sense of my data also revealed how I, as the researcher, needed to be aware of my own power to construct the cultural resources of respondents as cultural capital or as culturally redundant within the educational research

field, and the tendency of inappropriate use of research methods both to reinforce and to obscure that power. I conclude by considering the place of methods in qualitative research in this light, especially in the current context of debate about the future of educational research and the dangers of imposed consensus in the field. I turn first to an explanation of the context of my research, starting with a definition of the practice of engagement mentoring that I studied.

### ***What is 'engagement mentoring'?***

Engagement mentoring is a term I have used to designate a particular form of mentoring for socially excluded youth that emerged in the US in the early 1990s, and in Britain in the latter half of that decade. I have given a fuller account elsewhere of this model of mentoring and the socio-economic context for its development (see Colley, 2001a). Examples include a range of projects funded by the European Youthstart Initiative (Employment Support Unit, 2000, Ford, 1999) and of local projects funded through the voluntary sector (e.g. Benioff, 1997, see also Skinner and Fleming, 1999, for a review of over 40 similar projects). Since the election of the Labour government in 1997, engagement mentoring has also become a central feature of initiatives addressing youth offending and health education, and of school-to-work transition systems such as the Learning Gateway, New Deal for Young People, and the new Connexions service.

In brief, engagement mentoring has a number of defining characteristics. Firstly, its nature is planned and formalised within institutional contexts and agendas. This contrasts with the informal mentoring relationships that many young people seek out for themselves, in which agendas are negotiated without external third-party intrusion. Secondly, it is targeted at socially excluded young people, and its aim is to re-engage those young people with the labour market and structured routes thereto. The underpinning assumption is that paid employment is the prime condition for social integration, and legal or financial compulsion to participate is sometimes a factor. Thirdly, the role of mentors in this process is to transform young people's attitudes, values, behaviours and beliefs so that they acquire 'employability'. Employability itself is frequently defined as a requirement for young people to engage their personal commitment to the needs of employers and the economy (e.g. Industry in Education, 1996), although this requirement has been criticised as having 'more to do with shaping subjectivity, deference and demeanour, than with skill development and citizenship' (Gleeson, 1996: 97). There is, of course, nothing strikingly new in this concept of employability shaping various education and training frameworks as instrumental (cf. Bathmaker, 2001), but its influence upon the practice of mentoring has barely been questioned or investigated until now.

A fourth characteristic concerns the subjectivity and disposition of mentors themselves. A particular construct can be identified in the discourse of mentoring that includes the specific context of engagement mentoring, but also extends into other fields of professional development. Mentors are expected to go 'beyond the call of duty' on behalf of their mentees, and they are often portrayed as saintly or god-like characters (Ford, 1999: 13, see also Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995, Shea, 1992, Standing, 1999). In engagement mentoring, their role has been compared to that of a parent, exhibiting selfless devotion to the needs of the mentee. They must embody the ideal of both rational control and self-sacrificing care, in order to rectify the deficits or deviancies of their mentee and render them employable. Compounded by the fact that the vast majority of mentors for socially excluded young people are women, this is redolent of the gender stereotype of female nurture that is a central aspect of women's oppression (for a fuller critique of this construction of mentors' role, see Colley, 2001a, 2001b.) Furthermore, this is connected with a view that mentoring will also enhance the employability of those who act as mentors, whether they are

already in employment (Skinner and Fleming, 1999), or whether they are students preparing to enter the graduate labour market themselves (Goodlad, 1995).

### **Researching mentoring through the perceptions of participants**

In reviewing the literature on mentoring socially excluded young people, it appears that a considerable research agenda remains unexplored. Most mentoring research takes an individualistic approach to the subject, and much of it is conducted through the discipline of psychology. It consists predominantly of quantitative surveys that measure standardised 'before and after' indicators of outcomes for mentees such as criminal offending, educational grades and attendance, violent behaviour or substance misuse, or aspects of individual interactions between mentoring partners (e.g. Alleman, 1986, DuBois and Neville, 1997, Golden and Sims, 1997, Grossman and Tierney, 1998, McPartland and Nettles, 1991, Ringwalt et al, 1996). This literature has been criticised for bias in favour of mentoring, for failing to substantiate its claims for the benefits of mentoring, and for ignoring the 'dark side' of mentoring and its possible harmful effects (Long, 1997, Merriam, 1983, Scandura, 1998). Recent critical studies have challenged the ideological basis of engagement mentoring, and the way the practice is usually disembedded from its broader socio-economic and political context (Gulam and Zulfiqar, 1998, Piper and Piper, 1999, 2000).

There are no in-depth studies of the progress of engagement mentoring relationships between the 'before and after' measurements, so existing research gives us little insight into how such relationships develop through the perceptions of those involved. The generation of such data seemed to be a valuable contribution to this field of knowledge. I have also argued that the power dynamics of engagement mentoring need to be considered beyond the one-dimensional view of mentor-mentee relations, to take into account the operation of power at institutional and structural levels (Colley, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a). In particular, as the data was generated, it allowed me to address three neglected questions about engagement mentoring:

- Do young people exercise agentic power, and if so, how?
- Are mentors subject to external sources of power through control and surveillance, including self-surveillance?
- How are mentoring dyads situated in relation to wider power relations, through their overt institutional setting as well as more covert aspects of power such as dominant discourse and structural forms of oppression?

In the empirical study, funded by the Manchester Metropolitan University through a PhD student bursary, I used qualitative methods to investigate a small number of mentoring relationships between two groups of learners. The mentees were 16-18 year-olds on a pre-vocational training scheme I shall call 'New Beginnings'. It was run by a local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) for young people it classed as 'disaffected'. Mentoring was an optional part of the package for the young people, which also included in-house basic and pre-vocational skills training and intensively supported work experience placements. The mentors were all volunteers, and were undergraduate students from the local university. Most were either student teachers or students of applied social sciences, and were aged between 20 and 48. The goal of the scheme was to achieve outcomes of employment or Youth Training for the young people, and the mentors' training course and handbook made it clear that their primary task was to promote this goal in their discussions with their mentee.

The fieldwork consisted primarily of semi-structured individual interviews with mentors and mentees in established relationships. These were followed up when the relationship ended, or up to a year later in the case of on-going relationships. The opportunity

sample used (all the willing respondents during my period of access to the scheme) resulted in data about 9 relationships. I also interviewed New Beginnings' staff, related professionals, and was a participant observer in the mentors' training course and the scheme management committee. All interviews were taped and fully transcribed.

In contrast to the dominant approaches to research on mentoring, I used a tripartite analysis to explore the connections between micro-level interactions, identities dispositions, cultural backgrounds and discursive constructs that mentors and mentees brought to their relationships; meso-level influences on mentoring relationships through their local and institutional context within a particular scheme; and the macro-level influences of national policy, dominant discourse and wider socio-economic structures. I wanted to make sense of the way the young people and their student mentors experienced mentoring and the meanings it had for them, with a recognition that such experiences and meanings are inevitably mediated by contextual factors beyond the purely individual.

Accordingly, the research approach I adopted was a critical interpretive one, informed by my socialist feminist perspective and my own disposition as a white woman from a poor working class background. At the same time, I wanted avoid that perspective becoming a rigid mould for the data (Lather, 1986). I had to be constantly aware that my biases could easily lead me to be partisan towards the young people and to blame the mentors for any difficulties in the relationships. This would have framed my interpretations within the same individualistic interpretations by which most mentoring research constructs an opposition between the powerful mentor and the powerless or disempowered mentee.

My original research proposal posed just three key questions, which informed my interview schedule:

1. How do mentors' and mentees' self-perceptions and interperceptions influence their mentoring relationships?
2. To what extent is the process of mentoring perceived to be empowering by/for 'disaffected' young people and students in their transitions to adulthood and work?
3. How do social, economic and political contexts impact on the effectiveness of mentoring in addressing young people's disaffection and in preparing students for graduate employment?

### ***Paradigmatic analysis of data***

In one sense, it is of course artificial to separate out entirely any one stage of research from another. We talk about data generation and analysis as separate tasks, yet in reality I was sitting and making spider diagrams of each interview after I had carried it out, listening to the tapes, jotting notes and partial transcripts of what seemed to be significant passages, continuing to read the literature and make connections with that, cross-referencing different interviews with margin notes and so on. At the same time, issues I had expected to explore were becoming redundant, while unexpected themes emerged. Two of my early assumptions, reinforced by the literature, were quickly challenged. Firstly, it became evident that young people did not only assert their own agency through a 'take it or leave it' approach to the experience of mentoring, but engaged in active struggle within their relationships to pursue their own agendas rather than the institutional agenda mentors were expected to convey. Secondly, I had assumed that the students, possessing greater cultural capital than disaffected young people, would be able to accumulate relatively more through their experience of mentoring, and to obtain greater benefits than the young people from the process. In our interviews, however, the students seemed to have lost confidence the longer they had been mentoring. A number also described a strong sense of surveillance and even fear about their experiences, as they located themselves in relation to the New Beginnings scheme and its staff.

As these concerns emerged, I adjusted my interview schedule to explore them in further interviews. In this way, on-going analysis and generation of data came together in an iterative process where each fed into the other. Nevertheless, by the time I had completed my first round of data generation, I needed to focus on the analysis in a more concentrated way, and so I turned to research method textbooks for advice.

Both qualitative and quantitative research are dominated by a paradigmatic approach to data analysis and to cognition itself (Polkinghorne, 1995). This suggests that the basic technique is identify key categories or classifications that emerge from the data in relation to the research questions; to code the data according to these categories, with the use of the 'cut-and-paste' wordprocessing facility often recommended as alternative way to extract and classify data (Mason, 1996, Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Software programmes such as NUD\*IST allow similar but more sophisticated facilities writ large. Fundamentally, however, the process is one of identifying similarities and differences (Dey, 1993, May, 1997). The process then moves on to the elaboration of more abstract concepts, and the interconnections that can be drawn between categories, with recommendations for the drawing up of matrices, typologies and spectra. Huberman and Miles (1998) advocate that this should be pursued with an 'audit trail' approach that would allow other researchers to trace each step in the process. Such transparency is supposed to provide a further methodological guarantee of validity through the application of ever-more-perfect technique.

Some of these techniques were pragmatically impossible for me to pursue, given my limited IT competence and facilities, and constraints of time. However, I did set about constructing my categories, using mind-maps for all of the interview transcripts. I knew I was not genuinely using grounded data theory, because the relationship between my analysis and data generation was not premised on the evolving alternation of the formation of hypotheses and their verification in the field (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), but like many other researchers I drew on its ethos, trying to ensure that the analysis emerged from the data, that I had 'saturated' all my categories and that I had not glossed over relevant data (Bryman and Burgess, 1994a, 1994b). I hoped that I would be able to discern relationships of similarity and difference, both within each group of interviewees, and between them, and I worked extremely hard at the laborious task of trawling what was already a huge amount of data to produce the following categories:

- self-description
- motivation for involvement with mentoring
- perception of partner
- perception of disaffection
- understanding of the mentoring process
- impact of mentoring
- surveillance
- future prospects and wider social/economic/political factors

I felt confident in these categories, because they seemed rooted in the data and the iterative process of on-going analysis. I was pleased I had had some surprises, and this reassured me that, despite the impossibility of eliminating my subjective values and disposition, I was keeping a sufficiently open mind in the face of some very rich data. I then began to code the data in order to produce a written account of the early findings.

It was during this process that I began to encounter a number of problems. Firstly, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate as I cut-and-pasted passages from the interviews into the various categories, and despite the assurances of the textbooks authors that with care this would not happen, I found myself constantly drifting into an automatic mode. My very

familiarity with the data was decontextualising it – an error which was particularly disappointing given the way I wanted to locate mentoring through my research. Later discussions in research student workshops helped me see how the myopia induced by this process had obscured the significance of some of the data. On a number of occasions, young people with learning disabilities had told me long and rather rambling stories that seemed irrelevant during the coding process, but these appeared valuable when placed back in the context of the whole interview.

For example, when I asked one young person, Neil, who else he could talk to in the same way as his mentor Keith, he mentioned his granddad, aunts and uncles, brothers. He then launched into what my coding had dismissed as a long ‘shaggy-dog’ story about his washing getting stolen off the line in his garden, and the police coming round when his mum reported it. I came to see that Neil was offering me some really important data about his mentor: he was telling me that Keith belonged to a whole class of people in Neil’s world who were ‘good-to-talk-to’. They listened to your troubles and wanted to help, gave you advice about avoiding problems in the future, but could not really do much about what had already happened.

Secondly, the difficulty of the coding process led me into an unintentional prioritisation of the data generated with the student mentors over that generated with the young people. This relates to the greater degree of cultural capital the students possessed. They were highly articulate and talkative. One mentor, in reply to my first question about ‘how things were going’, spoke solidly for about 6 minutes, barely drawing breath. Although some of the young people also talked quite freely and at times eloquently in the interviews, the data generated by those with learning difficulties or who were severely shy was naturally much thinner. Moreover, most of the students were doing Education or Social Science degrees, and had undergone a mentor training programme equivalent to the input of a unit on a degree, whereas the young people had no induction to the mentoring process *per se* at all. Some of the young people knew about issues of social exclusion from the media or had discussions with parents who were mature students, and had some remarkably sharp critiques of government policy. However, the mentors tended to have much more theoretically constructed accounts, and often linked their experiences to their studies.

Unconsciously, I had allowed this imbalance of cultural capital between the two groups to influence my use of the data. It was easier to begin with the data from the mentors, and to feel that I was making some substantial progress in creating a textual product from our interviews. The volume and richness of the mentors’ data came to overwhelm the voices of the young people. The students provided so much more to cut-and-paste, while some of the transcripts from the young people reflected the difficulty in getting them to talk about their experiences, with one or two-word answers, silences, and ‘don’t know’ replies. Although I felt the interviews as a whole gave a strong sense of young people’s feelings about their mentors, and the meanings they brought to the process of mentoring, the data itself was not easily coded to reveal their constructions. So much of their practical knowledge of relationships was tacit, and was therefore difficult for them to put into words. At one point, I even considered abandoning my ambition of foregrounding the young people’s views altogether, to focus my thesis on the experiences of the mentors, and I am grateful to my supervisors for encouraging me to see that this was not the only solution.

This taught me how easy it is for researchers to interpret young people’s puzzlement at some of our questions as not-knowing, as we overlook the deeply integrated and internalised nature of tacit understanding – which is not consciously remembered or articulated precisely because it *is* so thoroughly known (Altheide and Johnson, 1998, Edmondson, 2001). In this way, we risk underestimating and misrepresenting the cultural resources that young people possess. As we construct the field of educational research, we



use our more powerful position within that field to dictate which resources count as capital, and which do not count and therefore cannot be brought into play (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, Hodkinson, 1998, Reay, 1998).

Thirdly, as I wrote up the results of my analysis, I found myself increasingly embarrassed by the text I was producing. Here is one brief extract where I was discussing the mentors' understanding of mentoring:

There is universal agreement among the mentors that mentoring is about listening to young people, but this is construed in different ways along a spectrum of judgementalism, including acceptance or mistrust of what the young people have to say. For Patricia, Sian, Jane and Yvonne, listening also includes "filtering out rubbish", taking things with a pinch of salt, going along with initial pretence, wondering about the other side of the story. Along with Aileen also, they talk about their efforts not to appear shocked or to react judgementally when young people talk about their lives. Aileen was the exception in another regard, however, as all of the others explicitly saw their role as to empathise with the young people, whereas she clearly stated that it was not about saying "I know what you're going through" (paper written for supervisors, November 1999).

This category had been particularly difficult to try to analyse, as the above extract shows, despite subjecting it to a whole battery of sub-coding and matrices in the hope of coming up with a typology or a spectrum. I have even managed to work one in with my 'spectrum of judgmentalism'. What can one make of similarities or differences when there are only differences? And what sense does this approach make anyway, when the data comes from only nine people? This extract apes quantitative methods in a nonsensical way, as if I could declare that ' $n = 9 \dots 100\%$  of the sample felt that listening was a key aspect of mentoring, although 40% dismissed some of the young people's talk as "rubbish"'. It clearly misses the point of small-scale case study research, which is not primarily to engage in comparison, and certainly not to provide any statistically reliable or generalisable findings, but to consider each case as singular, and to learn as much as one possibly can from it in the hoping of generating deeper insights (Wolcott, 1994).

Finally, as the examples above reflect, the technique of 'slicing' the data according to categories resulted in my representation of the relationships themselves becoming fragmented, although providing insights into their development was a key objective of my research. Categorisation of the data led more easily to a consideration of the respondents in groups – mentors, mentees and scheme staff – rather than of the mentoring dyads. Such grouping can be extremely valuable in analysing certain kinds of research. Ainley and Bailey's (1996) presentation of FE tutors', managers' and students' responses to the incorporation of FE colleges from 1992 is a case in point. Wolcott (1994), using the example of his own writing on US volunteers doing aid work in a Malay village, argues that this technique can be highly revelatory in researching processes of change. However, it seemed inappropriate for providing insights into the progress of dyadic mentoring relationships over time. My efforts seemed to be propelling me away from the very ambitions I had for my research.

These false starts brought me to a realisation that, unless the qualitative enquiry drives the methods, the methods will drive the enquiry. By 'enquiry' I do not mean the linear pursuit of textbook-style research questions and hypotheses, but enquiry as grounded in my own deeply-held interests, values and beliefs, which are themselves partly tacit and partly emotive as well as intellectual. There is no neutral space in which one can diligently apply positivist or post-positivist methods, while pursuing critical and interpretive insights.

Techniques and procedures can never be the guarantors of knowledge production in qualitative research (Gallagher, 1995). At the same time, I do not believe the false starts had been a waste of time, not least of all because they had helped me get to know my data so well, even if I needed to step back from it and gain a more holistic perspective. I had also learned some lessons the hard but effective way – through confronting the consequences of my mistakes. I abandoned paradigmatic analysis, turned elsewhere for guidance, and began to study some literature on life history and narrative analysis.

### **Narrative synthesis of data**

Finally, the heuristic researcher develops a *creative synthesis*, and original integration of the material that reflects the researcher's intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of meaning and essences of the experience...In this way the experience as a whole is presented, and, unlike most research studies, the individual persons remain intact (Moustakas, 1990: 50-51, original emphasis).

In a sense, a narrative approach to research is not properly analysis at all, although, like others, I shall continue to refer to it as such. It is a process of synthesis (Polkinghorne, 1995). The etymological roots of analysis mean 'taking apart', while those of synthesis mean 'putting together', so that the two would appear to be polar opposites. However, analysis in research can be defined as a reductive process, an essentially conservative narrowing of the data to issues relating to the research questions, and to a systematic description of what it is possible to know from the data with relative certainty (Wolcott, 1994). Narrative can fulfil this role, albeit in a very different way from standard research methods.

One of the major shifts that distinguishes narrative analysis from paradigmatic analysis is in its abandonment of the quest to catalogue similarities and differences (Polkinghorne, 1995, Wolcott, 1994). Instead, it looks for patterns of connections between *diverse* phenomena, and seeks to reflect both the richness of context surrounding the data, and its complexity:

The search is for data that will reveal uniqueness of the individual case or bounded system and provide an understanding of its idiosyncrasy and particular complexity (Polkinghorne, 1995: 15).

As such, narrative is particularly appropriate for the analysis of data which does not fall into a neat catalogue (Josselson, 1995). This method overtly acknowledges that the story produced cannot be a neutral representation of reality, and that theory built from it never just 'emerges' from data, but arises through the work of the researcher as the main instrument of the research, as she brings her own standpoint, efforts and interests to the process. It also helps to produce explanations. The construction of a narrative not only presents a story of what happened (rather than a series of topics), but also helps synthesise answers to questions about how and why things came about in a certain way (Zeller, 1995). As Richardson argues:

Writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing' – a method of discovery and analysis... Form and content are inseparable (1998: 345).

Multiple sources of data and layers of context can be woven into a story and its interpretation, and this seemed to fit the aims of my research much better. It also seemed to offer a way to allow my own intuition and hard intellectual work to balance the data from the

mentors and the young people in a more adequate way, allowing the young people's experiences to share centre stage, and locating all the players, including the mentors and New Beginnings' staff, within fields of wider power dynamics. Above all, it promised a way of writing about my research findings that might arouse meaning and interest for the readers, and evoke in them the same fascination as I felt for what I was discovering (cf. Fine and Deegan, 1996).

I used this approach to carry out my final analysis of the data, beginning with the three mentoring relationships that were still continuing a year after the first round of interviews, which I have treated as the core of my data from which to work outwards in recurrent hermeneutic episodes. I used the method of 'emplotment' (Polkinghorne, 1995), and working backwards chronologically, framed the outcome of each mentoring relationship, then selected data, including contextual material, according to its contribution to the plot. I made a point of always beginning with the data from the young person at each stage of the 'plot', rather than with that from the mentor. The process of returning to the data revealed any weaknesses in the plot, and allowed its readjustment to present a more faithful construction of the whole. It also mitigates the tendency to focus only on 'spicy' data, or to revel in the dysfunctional and lose sight of the importance of the mundane and routine that is often crucial to meaning (Fine and Weiss, 1998). I was able to write about two of the mentoring relationships I had studied, with far more satisfactory results than my previous attempts. I felt I had found my 'golden key', the methodological tool to unlock my data. I was confident that the third major case study I wanted to write up, that of Lisa (the mentee) and Yvonne (her mentor), would be quickly produced. I was once again disappointed, however, and the difficulties I encountered taught me even more about the nature of qualitative research.

### ***Lisa and Yvonne's case study: the problem***

Yvonne, a 21 year-old Applied Social Sciences student, had worked full- and part-time for several years in a respite home for severely handicapped children, as well as helping her mother care for her learning disabled brother. She intended to continue working with disabled children after her degree. She had already been mentoring 17 year-old Lisa for almost a year when I first interviewed them in June 1999, and they were still meeting together 9 months later. (Their relationship is described in detail in Colley, 2001a.) Yvonne and Lisa perhaps represented the opposite extremes of response in generating data through our interviews. Lisa was extremely shy and had difficulty communicating with others. Yvonne would respond at length to every question I posed.

Lisa had repeated a pattern in several work experience placements of starting well for a few weeks, then failing and withdrawing from the placement. As the placements started, Yvonne would lessen the frequency of their mentoring sessions, hoping the need for them would lessen and the relationship could be brought to an end. As the placements broke down, she felt obliged to return to weekly mentoring, and New Beginnings' staff would have to renew their efforts to try and find a suitable alternative placement for Lisa. Yvonne found this increasingly frustrating and disappointing as her mentor. She would tell Lisa to 'pull her socks up' and 'stick with it', but felt that Lisa was just acquiescing verbally without any intention of following her mentor's advice. At the time of our final interviews, both admitted to me that they wanted to stop mentoring together, but neither felt able to say this to their partner. Of all the relationships I studied, the story of this one seemed the most obvious to me: here were two people going round in circles, failing to make progress, but unable to draw conclusions or to draw their relationship to a conclusion.

However, as I tried to use the linear method of emplotment to create a narrative from the data, I found myself going round in circles. The repetitious nature of the story – Lisa's

placement successes turning into failures, Yvonne's exhortations collapsing into demoralisation – presented a number of problems. The first and most obvious was that of writing in an interesting way about something – repetition – which is generally regarded as inherently *uninteresting*. Secondly, how could I represent circular experiences in a narrative style that tends inherently to the linear? Thirdly, how could I avoid a reductive diminishment of a story which is far more complex than can be represented in the remit of this paper?

Coding of Lisa and Yvonne's responses about their experiences and meanings of engagement mentoring had led me to a fairly definite interpretation of their relationship. It appeared thus as a tale in which Yvonne bullied Lisa, did not reflect sufficiently on her own practice, and was therefore unable to break the cycle of repeated failure for Lisa's placement and for her own role as mentor. It offered evidence of the counterproductive nature of directive approaches to mentoring disaffected youth, and revealed the harsh and unpleasant realities of the engagement mentoring model. It would have fitted well with some of the psychological research about dysfunctional mentoring relationships. For example, following Scandura's (1998: 454) typology of mentoring behaviour that can result in psychological damage for participants, Yvonne could have been presented as a tyrannical mentor, while Lisa's responses could be seen as sabotage of Yvonne's efforts and of the employment goals of the scheme.

There would undoubtedly have been some element of truth in such an explanation, but a major problem for me was that it reduced the question of power to the micro-level of individual interactions, and to the issue of the mentor's abuse of her superior power over the mentee as a passive victim. It also distorted their story by imposing a diachronic form in addition to this relational opposition, whereas I needed to find a way to express the *synchronic* nature of the repetitive cycle of their relationship. What might be the similarities and parallels in the two women's experiences, including the subjection of both to the operation of wider and more covert dynamics of power?

### ***A creative approach to transforming data: 'radial' narration***

Discussions with supervisors and colleagues led me to follow the advice of Nelson (1993) to overcome writer's block by being creative and playful with my writing. I spent an invaluable hour with Ian Stronach, talking over metaphors I might use to engage with Lisa and Yvonne's story, which led to the notion of the relationship slowly 'freezing up'. He also gave me a copy of an article about radial narration by the science fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin (1981). In that article, she argues that linear, logical narratives derive from Aristotelean tradition, while contrasting traditions, such as the Celtic, do not follow that cultural norm of 'beginning, middle and end'. Instead, '[its] normal structure is "radial", circling about, repeating and elaborating the central theme. It is all "middle"' (Clancy, 1970, cited in Le Guin, 1981: 190). In a metaphorical sense, such narratives are more like a hologram, or a crystal (Richardson, 1998), than a storyboard, allowing us to approach a story from a myriad tangents, and at the same time to see into the centre of it in a way that linear or plane representations cannot allow. This is a radically different kind of transparency than that of Huberman and Miles' (1998) 'audit trails'.

Using some of these insights, I re-cast the writing of Lisa and Yvonne's story in a creative framework, not fictionalising it as such (see Campbell, 2000 and Campbell and Kane, 1998 for an account of 'telling tales' hybridised from a number of respondents, and Sparkes, 1995, for a defence of the use of fiction in research), but presenting the data in a more ludic way, by interweaving it with the fable of 'Good King Wenceslas', presented in a visual way, with large amounts of blank space on the white pages to evoke some sense of the growing emptiness, frustration and disoriented unhappiness that seemed to characterise the

later stage of Lisa and Yvonne's relationship. Although I engaged in free writing, with no object other than creatively expressing the data before me, the result confronted me with a radically different interpretation of that data. Instead of focusing on the opposition between the two women, and the tussle between them in the relationship, something else emerged much more clearly from the 'impressionist tale' (Van Maanen, 1988) I had constructed. Here is one illustrative extract from this tale:

*Lisa was on New Beginnings. New Beginnings was about getting into training and work. Yvonne's Dream Line says that mentoring helps young people get problems off their chest so they can get on with training and work. Problems are burdens, like heavy stones. Unless they get help to off-load this burden, young people may end up going round in circles. Lisa wanted help carrying her stones.*

Helen: Tell me what it's like in general, having a mentor, from your point of view?

*Lisa: Someone to talk to. Because I take on my family's problems and my friends' problems as well as my own.*

*Someone-To-Talk-To should help with the stones.*

*Lisa knew what the stones were made of:*

*One of the stones was her Dead Mother.*

*One of the stones was her Little Brother who was Really Really Bad and Naughty, and whom she Does Not Get On With. And that stone carried its own sack of stones, which were the Dead Mother, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, Swearing at Adults, Being Excluded from School, Refusing to Help with the Housework, Smashing Windows, Hitting Lisa's Friends, Needing Bereavement Counselling, and Refusing To Go For Counselling.*

*One of the stones was her Big Sister. And that stone carried its own sack of stones, which included the Dead Mother, Lisa, the Little Brother, Giving Up her Job to Look After the Family, Being Mother-Auntie-Cleaner, Arguing with her Boyfriend, Crying, and Needing Lisa's Shoulder to Cry On.*

*One of the stones was her Father. And that stone carried its own sack of stones, which included the Dead Mother, Lisa, the Little Brother, the Big Sister, and Working Nightshifts to Earn Enough Money to Support the Family.*

*One of the stones was her Best Friend Who Is 12 Years Old. And that stone carried its own sack of stones, which included Learning Difficulties, Being Bullied Because She's Fat, Not Being Listened To by Teachers Who Say She Is Lying About Being Bullied, and Something That Happened When She Was Young.*

*Some of Lisa's other stones were: Sexual Abuse by Her Uncle When She Was Five, Missing School in Year 10 to Be With her Dying Mother, Being Bullied at School About her Dead Mother, Refusing to Go Back to School, Not Doing GCSE's, Wishing*

*She Had Done GCSE's (Especially History), Needing Counselling, Refusing To Go For Counselling, and Being the Spitting Image of her Dead Mother.*

*It was a very heavy sack. It held a lot of stones. Maybe Someone-To-Talk-To would help.*

*Maybe Yvonne would help. Yvonne had quite a few stones to carry herself. Some of Yvonne's stones were:*

*A Brother with Learning Disabilities, Getting Burnt Out by GCSE's, Hating Sixth Form College, Hating A Levels (Especially Sociology), Giving Up a Good Job to Come to University Because Her Mother Wanted Her To and Tuition Fees Were Being Introduced the Following Year, and Studying a Social Sciences Degree Even Though She Hated Sociology Which Is a Load of Waffle Just Strange Theories Ranting On About Life Why Bother?*

*The last one was getting heavier all the time.*

*These had given her lots of practice at carrying stones. Plus her mother taught her how.*

I came to see that a gendered concept of care was a central aspect of both women's dispositions. As I have discussed in relation to discourses of mentoring (Colley, 2001a, 2001b), feminine stereotypes of care serve to oppress women through deeply internalised roles which serve the interests of dominant groupings (Gaskell, 1992, Gilligan, 1995, Walkerdine, 1992). They obstruct rather than enhance the possibility of communication and relationship between individuals through their demand for self-sacrifice and the repression of powerful emotions. This profoundly ideological construction of care was produced and reproduced in both Lisa and Yvonne through the process of mentoring, as each learned more thoroughly from her partner that caring involved the attempt to absorb and neutralise the other's difficulties and pain. Yet the longer their mentoring went on, the less able they were to escape the idealised images each brought to the process, or to admit that truth to each other. Mentoring had become (to borrow Walkerdine's (1992) phrase) an impossible fiction. No wonder, then, that the relationship descended into immobility and silence.

In this respect, the course and outcome of this particular mentoring relationship was inextricably bound up with power dynamics that have defined patriarchal class society for millennia. This aspect of the operation of power in Lisa and Yvonne's relationship reveals another layer of complexity in their experiences of mentoring, going beyond the individualised explanation I had traced through Scandura's (1998) psychological model. It highlights the contradiction in feminist models of mentoring which advocate a basis of nurture rather than control. For Yvonne and for Lisa, nurture through engagement mentoring inevitably involved control: over others, and over oneself. Both were positioned as twin objects of the project of forming employable dispositions that are also structurally gendered. In hermeneutic fashion, I then went back to all the data, and re-considered it in the light of this interpretation. The insight I had gained from Lisa and Yvonne's case study became a pivotal experience around which the entire thesis was eventually constructed and theorised.

In considering the researcher-researched relationship and my stance towards the data, the issue of cultural capital had been transformed. In my initial analysis, the focus has been Lisa's lack and Yvonne's wealth of cultural capital as represented in the different volume and

character of their responses within our interviews. In the later analysis, I became concerned with the way in which mentoring appeared as a process of emotional labour worked upon both women's disposition or, to use Bourdieu's (1986) term, *habitus* to produce a gendered form of cultural capital or employability.

### ***The place of method in qualitative enquiry***

Many qualitative researchers advocate the rigorous use of 'proper' research methods, although they may differ radically in what they judge such proper methods or rigour in their use to be (see, for example, Delamont, 1999). I tried the 'proper' methods of paradigmatic analysis recommended in many textbooks, and found these wanting. In applying emplotment to synthesise my case studies, I thought I had found a 'proper' method which did indeed work for some of the data. Even this did not prove effective in analysing and interpreting a different kind of relationship between Yvonne and Lisa.

The lesson I have drawn from this experience is that there are *no* techniques, whether conventional or radically non-conventional, to which we can turn with certainty that they will resolve our problems in making sense of qualitative data. If deployed unthinkingly, research techniques may drive our enquiry off course rather than help us gain in understanding. The use of radial narrative is no more a guarantee of success than any other method. With all data, we have to be able to think through the *most appropriate* methods to apply to its analysis. This may of course entail an assumption that all research is value-laden, rather than the positivist/post-positivist declaration that research ought to be value-free (Hammersley, 1992). How we transform our data is determined by the way we intend to use it.

In my case, I had the critical aim of revealing covert aspects of the operation of various echelons of power, and revealing the misrecognition (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) that the practice of engagement mentoring can entail. My initial errors placed me, as researcher, in the power position within the educational research field. Unwittingly, I arbitrated through my early analysis, interpretation and writing the degree to which different responses, mediated through differing types of cultural resources, would count as cultural capital in the academic text produced. The unthinking use of dominant research techniques resulted in reinforcing my power as researcher to rule different respondents' cultural resources in or out of the educational research 'game', and to dictate what from the data would appear as cultural capital in the research text. At the same time, it obscured the power I was wielding through its claimed status as rigorous and value-neutral guarantor of truth. Paradoxically, it was through allowing my less conscious but deeply-held values and beliefs to play upon the data through free creative writing that I was able to accept both mentors' and mentees' cultural resources as valid, to foreground both, and to arrive a very different view of how issues of cultural capital were posed for them within the fields of engagement mentoring and of gendered social relations.

I would conclude by arguing that such questions are of vital importance in the UK research community today, given recent cautions about the growing threat of imposed universal criteria and standardised methods for research (Hodkinson, 2001, Stronach, 2001). Critical research has shown that positivist methods in mentoring research have limited our understanding of mentoring relationships for over two decades (Merriam, 1983, Piper and Piper, 2000, Roberts, 2000). Despite the volume of academic literature it remains poorly conceptualised and under-theorised. Diversity in research purposes and methods, and the ability of researchers to adopt and adapt research techniques flexibly as appropriate to their data, are essential to enabling new contributions to our knowledge about new forms of mentoring, such as engagement mentoring as they emerge. If practice is genuinely to be based on evidence that expands our understanding, it is unwise to restrict the cultural

resources of the research community to rule only a narrow set of methods admissible as cultural capital in the educational research field.

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