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# Mentoring as a Distributed Practice of Care: A Conversation

Silvia Gherardi* [a] Michela Cozza [b] Laura Lucia Parolin [c]

[a] Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento (Italy)
[b] Department of Organization and Management, Mälardalen University (Sweden)
[c] Department of Culture and Language, University of Southern Denmark (Denmark)

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**Abstract**

The conversation that we perform seeks to foreground mentoring as a collegial and distributed practice of reciprocity, care, and support happening in the *interstices* of academia. We argue that mentoring in academia can be a distributed process by promoting a learning community of doctoral students who participate in the research life and other department or research group activities. Promoting such learning communities also entails encouraging reciprocal *kindness* and *care* in any relationship, vertical or horizontal.

**Keywords**: Care; academic careers; distributed mentoring; community of practice.

* silvia.gherardi@unitn.it

## 1 Contextualizing Mentoring

Mentoring in Europe has existed as early as Ancient Greek times. The word's origin comes from Mentor, son of Alcimus in Homer's *Odyssey*. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he placed Mentor in charge of his son Telemachus and of Odysseus' palace. If we stop the story here, it makes sense that, nowadays, the role of a mentor is associated, in many cultures, with wisdom and guidance (with a male gender root). However, this connotation is not due to the role played by the son of Alcimus, which was not particularly effective. So much so that the goddess Athena intervened[1] and provided Telemachus with the necessary guidance. It is this godly intervention from Athena that ultimately lends its meaning to our modern word "mentor", and not the personality of Mentor *him*self.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines "mentoring" as "the act of helping and giving advice to a younger or less experienced person, especially in a job or at school". Such a definition corresponds to the common understanding of mentoring as a relationship between a mentor and a *protégé(e)* or mentee. Although there is no single moment that marks the beginning of mentoring research, most researchers cite Kathy Kram's (1983) article as the starting point for contemporary studies on mentoring. In this initial work, Kram identifies stages of mentoring and emphasizes that mentoring involves an intense relationship whereby a senior or more experienced person (the mentor) provides advice or modeling and personal support. Although many other scholars after Kram helped to further articulate the concept and the practice of mentoring, there is always a tendency to overlook the micro-practices of cooperation and collaboration that go beyond a one-to-one relationship between a mentor and a mentee (Cozza, 2011; 2013). The conversation that follows seeks to foreground mentoring as a collegial and distributed practice of reciprocity, care, and support happening in the *interstices* of academia.

## 2 The Story Goes...

**Silvia Gherardi (Silvia)**: When I received David Stark's invitation to write about my mentoring experience — "even outside of office hours", to use his words — I was very perplexed and initially thought of politely refusing. I asked myself: "Have I been a mentor or even a good mentor?". Are we sure that what is done in academia is "mentoring"? When I was directly responsible for undergraduate students or PhD students, I exercised my authority and responsibility from an accountability perspective. But is this activity "mentoring"? I know how mentoring is done in companies, in a one-to-one relationship, and as an asymmetrical relationship between an expert and a novice. In academia it is different, but how and why is it different? I set out to reflect on this with others and ask these questions to two people with whom I have a shared experience in the academic world before retirement, and with whom I still collaborate. I have invited Laura Parolin and Michela Cozza to join me in this conversation. Laura and Michela both received their doctorates in Information Systems and Organizations in Trento in 2006 and 2007, respectively. Since then, they have had time to enter the academic context as *colleagues* and experience mentoring activities themselves. Both left Italy and have been working abroad for many years. In our shared experience as doctorates, a role that I have

1. From a gender perspective, it is interesting to note that "Athena determined that, for Telemachus, a young man, to hear, digest, and act on credible and important advice, the best tactic was to take the form of the eponymous (and still traditional) Mentor. This may have been the only way that Telemachus would hear and heed her ultimately life-saving advice" (Cassling et al., 2022, p. 159).

coordinated for several years, we have played different roles. There is also a generation gap. I was Laura's supervisor, while Michela was supervised by Barbara Poggio, another member of the doctoral board. It is worth noting that the board members in this doctoral program shared a philosophy of *collective management* with respect to doctoral students. Thus, I feel it was more of a form of *distributed mentoring* than an approach centered on an exclusive mentor–mentee relationship. What has been your experience?

**Laura Lucia Parolin (Laura)**: The doctorate was intense in different regards. It was a stimulating but challenging experience: intellectually, socially, and emotionally. We lived a collective experience, without a doubt. Working in a group meant being part of a community and being in a relationship, not only with the supervisor. During this time, I felt I could discuss contents, not only what related to my thesis, but also linked to research projects. It entailed *socialization to the academic practices* of a research group with people working in smaller groups on different projects. I remember the surprise and positive feeling of discovering the scholarly approach to discussion, where the group required and appreciated heterogeneous ways of thinking about topics or issues. I enjoyed being part of these discussions and progressively learned to *trust* not only my reasoning, but also my feelings. I remember being fascinated by the fact that the talks were always intellectually intense, and my opinion did matter. It was a way to exercise trust in my reflections and feelings, and practice *the art of explaining* them. I should add that as a young non-binary lesbian in a patriarchal country, I was not very used to freely expressing my ideas, openly sustaining my reasoning, and following my gut instinct. Participating in the group and practicing making connections and explanations was a way to find, legitimize, and practice using my voice. This is one of the things I treasure from my PhD experience and what made me fall in love with academia.

Being part of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics (RUCOLA) was both terrific and terrifying. It was an actual research unit, and the other participants were expert academics. Thus, the other PhD students and I were socialized to academic practices by joining the group as newcomers. I recall a day at the end of a RUCOLA meeting where we discussed the concept of community of practice. On that occasion, I commented to a fellow PhD student about how good it was to be newcomers in a place that recognizes our peripheral position and thus allows us to experiment. I remember commenting on this aloud, laughing at our luck, and tacitly implying that infinite error tolerance was granted. A senior member — Antonio Strati — heard my comment and ironically replied: "Enjoy your few moments as a newcomer because, you know, they don't last forever!".

**Michela Cozza (Michela)**: I share this feeling of having been part of a community that was both the formal one — corresponding to the doctoral program we were enrolled in — and a more informal aggregation, defined by "us", in our different capacities, roles, and personalities. We had the opportunity to actively contribute to its development to a certain extent. In Laura's and my case, this sense of belonging was strengthened by being members of the same research unit — RUCOLA — in which Silvia is a founding member. As doctoral students of the Information Systems and Organization program, we had the chance to grow together, think together, and support each other — without wanting to either idealize or romanticize that experience, which, as we all know, can also be very lonely and isolating. Still, I treasure the memory of having been offered the chance to be and think with others, counting on a group rather than only my supervisor. Indeed, the support was *distributed* and *reciprocal*. I knew that around me there were senior colleagues and peers who I could have asked for feedback, advice, or simply information beyond the time administratively scheduled for getting responses or checking the progression of my work. In this regard, my experience as a PhD student was not reduced to

the institutional(ized) moments of a class or systematic meetings with my supervisor. I believe that there also was a key material component that facilitated our collaborative interactions — especially those between PhD students. I refer to an open space reserved for us. It was rare to see our professors passing by; it was our space. It was a physical meeting point where we could work side by side, chat, laugh, and share our discomfort and frustration, or satisfaction and excitement. The life of a PhD student can be a roller coaster of emotions and intensities, and it is good to have fellows around! In this regard, the experience of being a "mentee" — if we want to stick to this terminology — was mixed with that of being mentors ourselves. Do you remember, Laura, when I asked you to meet? I was at the beginning of my journey as a PhD student and was told that I could have you as a reference. You invited me to have a coffee. It was a friendly chat where — with your example — you taught me that academia can also include friendship and spontaneous generosity, which are key to building a sense of community and belonging, in my view.

**Silvia**: Yes, these elements were spontaneous and came together randomly, but behind them there was also an element of planning and intentionality. In shaping the doctorate, on the board, we discussed what type of pedagogy and educational relationship we wanted to foster. I would say that there was a "line of values". As often happens, this line was formed by opposition to the "other" doctorate, where *other* should be understood in quotation marks. The opposition concerned the culture of competition and individual rivalry, according to which doctoral students were told that their classmates were competitors, and academic competition began from the first day of the doctorate program. I always thought that was and still is a mistake, if not a disvalue. Learning processes develop better through *collaboration* and *scaffolding*, without denying the contribution of competitiveness. I am a supporter of competition in sports, considering the values of transparency and recognition of others' skills when these lead to higher performances. Added value is created when a habit and a culture of sharing and exchanging information are established among PhD students and colleagues. Sometimes, spontaneous practices become institutionalized. For example, I remember when a group of PhD students spontaneously started to meet and discuss "my favorite article". In turn, everyone was invited to say why they loved that particular article, and why it spoke to their heart. I admired that initiative because it was a way to learn how to write and develop an *aesthetic sense of scientific communication*. Is this a mentoring experience within the peer group? If so, we should revisit the definition of "mentoring".

Other similar practices were developed. I was used to meeting with all the PhD students I supervised once a month and collectively discussing their progress and the difficulties (but also the joys) they encountered along the PhD path. Those who were in their first year listened to the problems of those who were writing their thesis, and those who were in their second year and struggling with access to the field could form an idea of the process of transforming field notes into writing. Listening to each other's struggles enabled anticipatory socialization in becoming a PhD student. I remember that one day Manuela Perrotta recognized this process and said to the other PhD students: "It's like in kindergarten: there are the older ones who take care of the middle ones, and the middle ones have to take care of the little ones!" This sentence led to collective hilarity and immediately transitioned into *storytelling*. In a similar situation, an unknown trajectory, like that of a PhD student, was tamed as a path one had already taken at the beginning of the educational journey. And then, laughing together is cathartic! Another practice of collective exploration of academia — institutionalized in our doctorate — was to push all the doctoral students to submit abstract proposals for international conferences, and this happened only two months after the new doctoral students started. In this way, their abilities

were tested immediately. Some abstracts were accepted, others rejected, and this was "normal", it did not constitute a failure, but only a challenge that sometimes went well, sometimes not. When both professors and their doctoral students were going to the same conference, we suggested that — in a safe space like the doctoral group — those who would present a paper should rehearse in front of their classmates and receive suggestions for improvement. It is a way *to learn how to give and receive feedback*. It was also good practice for the supervisors to go and listen to their PhD students' public presentations, perhaps bringing a "life jacket" with them in case it was needed. Is this "mentoring"? Both horizontal and vertical?

**Laura**: Yes, it is an excellent example of mentoring. Your observation makes me reflect that good practice in distributed mentoring requires a balanced relationship between vertical learning and horizontal collaboration. A key element of this relationship consists of *becoming with others* in the work practices and being intellectually and emotionally together in a safe space. You, Silvia, talked about scaffolding, a concept close to this process of becoming. For example, the collaboration with Attila Bruni was crucial for me. Back then, he had already participated in several research projects and was finishing his doctoral studies. Thus, even if he was just a few years ahead, he was much more of an expert than me. I learned a lot by observing him, working with him on data, discussing, presenting papers, writing articles, and having many dinners together, where we talked about topics that were not only related to academia. He made me "breathe" RUCOLA's organizational culture and that of the doctoral school I was part of. Thanks to this collaboration, I could imagine my future research areas and become a mentor for others myself. So, Michela, if I was there for you and others, it was because Attila socialized me to this practice of *kindness*.

**Michela**: This learning experience — at least mine — made clear to me that *knowing is always both individual* and *collective*, and practicing is a crucial aspect of it. For example, to me, it was useful to be involved in organizing activities like conferences or events, either on a small or bigger scale, like *The 6th International Conference on Organizational Learning and Knowledge* under the lead of Davide Nicolini and Silvia (Gherardi) (June 9–11, 2005). It was formative in that I could learn how academia, as an organization, works and what is needed to make it work. Furthermore, that kind of involvement was always within a team, working to reach a common goal. It was never an individual commitment, but rather a collegial endeavor that allowed me (us) *to know in practice*, a collegial *learning-by-doing*.

**Silvia**: Do you remember when we went together, twelve PhD students and two or three professors, to Paris for a week to meet other doctoral schools and discuss with them what it means to do a doctorate in different contexts? I got funding for the internationalization of our program, and with Michela we planned some meetings: with the Centre de Recherche en Gestion of the École Polytechnique, with the Centre de sociologie de l'innovation of the École nationale supérieure des mines, where we met Bruno Latour and chatted with him sitting in the garden on a sunny day. We also met colleagues and PhD students at Paris-Sceaux, at ESSEC Business School, and at the Conservatoire nationale des arts et métiers.

**Laura**: Oh yes, fantastic! It's a pity that, at that time, I had already finished my doctorate, so I didn't have the pleasure of meeting Latour as a PhD student. As Antonio Strati anticipated, my time as a newcomer did not last forever. Nevertheless, during the PhD, contact with international visiting scholars was another relevant practice in distributed mentoring, and their influence stayed with me longer and still affects my work. For example, Barbara Czarniawska was a recurring visiting scholar at the time, and the exchange with her was relevant to many of us. The Information Systems and Organizations doctoral students had the privilege of having, among many other scholars, Patricia Martin, Howard Becker, Neil Smelser, Aaron Cicourel,

and Rejo Miettinen pass through and enrich the discussions of both the research group and doctoral students.

Moreover, as you mentioned, Michela, RUCOLA was very active in hosting seminars and conferences, and the doctoral students participated in their organization. For example, I was part of the team that organized the *International Workshop on Practice-Based Studies* at the University of Trento on November 6–7, 2003. I also had the task of presenting an overview of the literature, which — as it became clear to me later — would set the foundation for the workshop. Thus, I presented this literature review (which you, Silvia, read in advance) that linked the work of several scholars. When talking from the podium, I realized my audience was composed of the authors I was referring to in my speech. It was terrifying but also exciting. People in the flesh, embodying the academic community and scholarly discussions, and participating in these discussions also meant being on that podium with my body, my shaky voice, and my less-than-perfect English.

**Silvia**: It is a good example of *soft pedagogy*: throw the PhD student in the water. They either drown or learn to swim! However, we had life jackets, and no one ever drowned, as far as I know...

**Michela**: I think it was a matter of creating the conditions for us to (safely) have an experience beyond the canonical moments of a doctoral program, that is, when the PhD students must deliver specific outputs, discuss them, and show the progression of their research. There was room for a more fluid learning process not confined to institutional meetings or gatherings, but rather happening in the *interstices* of our daily experience. There were opportunities that, I believe, were created for our academic growth, but certainly, benefiting from them depended on individual willingness to make the most of those opportunities.

**Silvia**: Almost all of you who received this doctorate have positions abroad, and I regret that we have been unable to socialize you to Italian academia...

**Michela**: We could say that academia is not one but multiple. The doctorate socialized us to a certain kind of academia that was not the one both Laura and I have been asked to associate with in several circumstances. I would say that consciously, we have declined invitations (to change the argument of our thesis, for example) that probably would have made our life and career easier. In my case, I was familiar with the University of Trento, as I graduated from there, and I had clear ideas about what I wanted to study and how, because I was aware of what that context could have offered me. This confidence enabled me to make decisions and reject a kind of academia that was asking me to adjust my interests, posture, and objectives to align with stronger voices.

**Laura**: Academia is not always caring or fair. Adhering to one's intellectual path and ethics and embracing all the elements of one's positioning (i.e., as a feminist woman and queer) is undoubtedly not the easiest way to get in. We must also add that we are talking about years in which career paths in Italy were mainly blocked, and many of us were forced to leave Italy to pursue an academic career and become faculty members. Unfortunately, in Italy, several cohorts of women left academia because of this situation.

**Michela**: This reminds me of another important point I learned — which I might consider as a result of the mentoring experience I had as a mentee. It is related to how to tackle "problems", including those I encountered during fieldwork while doing my research. There was a kind of tacit knowledge among us that constructive attitudes were appreciated, while complaining was discouraged. "Always come up with a possible solution rather than limiting yourself to just seeing the problem", which was a powerful message applicable to different circumstances later on.

**Silvia**: ...also because you learn not to expect others to solve your problems...

**Michela**: Right. Furthermore, a problem is always part of a larger context that should be appreciated in its complexity. I would say that I was taught *sense-making* more than problem-solving, which is still something I ask my students to do to contrast the tendency to see a problem disconnected from its context when problems are in fact always situated. I deem it crucial to learn how to "problematize problems", if we can put it that way.

**Silvia**: It is incredible how many things are forgotten and how many things go unnoticed. For example, I forgot to talk about what I did in the ten years that have passed since I retired, and which perhaps can be seen as a prevalent mentoring activity. When I retired, I had contracts as a visiting professor. I spent five years in Oslo, two and a half years in Helsinki, and four at Mälardalen at the Department of Organization and Management, where Michela works. I went to these universities twice a year, more or less, and then worked remotely. Together with Michela and her colleagues, I also spent the COVID-19 period and wrote two articles on how to maintain and change academia by overcoming the so-called "social distance". These years, somehow, were the most significant of my career (or should I say my post-career?) because my work mainly consisted of working with PhD students and early career researchers, and therefore, I met many people who had the time to read, to ask questions, to be curious, and to experiment in writing together. It was a privilege for both them and me, because there was no hierarchical relationship between us. I felt free, and they were not required to take into account what I said if it did not make sense to them. Perhaps it is under similar circumstances that one can transmit what Howard Becker called the "tricks of the trade". Can we say that *mentoring is a reciprocal relation*? I have to say that I am very pleased when I can *transmit the tricks of the trade* and see that they also work for other people. At the same time, I have to acknowledge how much I learned from PhDs and younger colleagues, and I am not only referring to digital skills and how my competencies benefited from being updated through their suggestions. I received books, tips on poetry and films that will stay with me forever and that I consider a real gift.

How can we close this conversation? Do we have a final point?

**Laura**: We can conclude that mentoring in academia can be a distributed process by promoting a learning community of doctoral students who participate in the research life and other department or research group activities. Promoting such learning communities also entails encouraging reciprocal *kindness* and *care* in any relationship, vertical or horizontal.

**Michela**: We might not want to put a stop there, but rather, we should keep our conversation open to explore what more *distributed and caring relationships* may bring to academia.

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**Silvia Gherardi** – Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento (Italy)
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7026-2418 | silvia.gherardi@unitn.it
https://webapps.unitn.it/du/en/Persona/PER0004236/Curriculum
Silvia Gherardi recently retired from the University of Trento (Italy). Her research interests include feminist new materialism, entrepreneurship, practice-based studies, and post-qualitative methodologies in organization studies. Her latest books include *The Posthumanist Epistemology of Practice Theory* (Palgrave, 2023, with M. Cozza) and *Organization Studies and Posthumanism* (Routledge, 2024, with F.-X. de Vaujany & P. Silva).

**Michela Cozza** – Department of Organization and Management, Mälardalen University (Sweden)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6998-5034
https://www.mdu.se/en/malardalen-university/staff?id=mcz01
Michela Cozza is an Associate Professor at the Department of Organization and Management at Mälardalen University (Sweden). Her research interests focus on the relationships between social and material aspects of organizational practices, leveraging a practice-based approach informed by science and technology studies. Her latest books include *Ethics of Engagement in Research Practices. Response-ability in Organization and Management* (Routledge, 2025, Eds., with A. Carreri & B. Poggio), *The Posthumanist Epistemology of Practice Theory* (Palgrave, 2023, with S. Gherardi), and *Key Concepts in Science and Technology Studies* (Studentlitteratur, 2021).

**Laura Lucia Parolin** – Department of Culture and Language, University of Southern Denmark (Denmark)
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7385-9797
https://portal.findresearcher.sdu.dk/en/persons/parolin
Laura Lucia Parolin is an Associate Professor of Organizational Communication at the Department of Culture and Language, University of Southern Denmark. She is a practice-based scholar whose research interests lie in the entanglement of discoursive-sociomaterial practices with affects, focusing on the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of work practices and organizations. She is interested in sensitive knowledge, human and nonhuman contributions to aesthetic practices, queer subjectivities, and arts as research methods.