

## Using collaborative autoethnography to explore online doctoral mentoring: Finding empathy in mentor/protégé relationships

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### ABSTRACT

*We used collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to investigate how we, in our prior work as doctoral mentors at an online institution that assigned students to dissertation chairs, navigated the challenges associated with relationship deterioration with some of our student protégés. We explored how the process of reflection and interrogation might shape our future responses to conflict so that we might improve our strategies for successful and satisfying mentoring outcomes. We applied Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn's (1982) framework, with constructs Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect (EVLN), to examine specific cases from our work as dissertation mentors. Originally created to help explain responses to romantic relationship deterioration, we applied this framework to the dissertation mentor-protégé relationship in order to reflect on ways to improve student progress. Two themes from our analysis of each case emerged from the data. Each theme tied to the student's behavior and the impact that behavior had on our collective perception. Implications are provided for mentoring students in online doctoral programs.*

**KEYWORDS:** Collaborative autoethnography, online doctoral mentoring, mentor-protégé relationships

### Introduction

Perhaps no relationship in a graduate student's academic life is more important than that between the student and the doctoral mentor (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Battaglia & Battaglia, 2016; Doyle, Jacobs, & Ryan, 2016; Houdyshell, 2017; Mason, 2016). These relationships involve high-stakes outcomes, such as successful completion of the dissertation, recommendations for employment, and publication opportunities, and often last several years. In contrast to numerous studies that have focused on the point-of-view of doctoral student protégés as they experience this relationship (e.g., Barnes, William, & Archer, 2010; Burkard, Knox, DeWalt, Fuller, Hill, & Schloesser, 2014; King & Williams, 2013; Peluso, Carleton, Richter, & Asmundson, 2011; Spaulding & Rockinson-

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Szapkiw, 2012), fewer studies have focused on the experience of the faculty mentors (Goodman, 2006; Knox, Burkard, Janecek, Pruitt, Fuller & Hill, 2011).

The mentor-protégé relationship involves socialization of the student into the academic world (Gardner, 2010), establishment of trust between the two parties (Harding-DeKam, Hamilton, & Loyd, 2012), and specific guidance by the mentor on the development of a worthy dissertation (Kritsonis, 2011). Regardless of whether the mentor and protégé select each other or if a third person matches them together, maintaining a harmonious relationship is likely in the best interest of everyone. Still, a variety of relationship problems may occur that require the mentor's attention (Hicks, 2011; Schniederjans, Schniederjans, & Levy, 2012). In departments where students choose the mentor and attractive alternatives exist, either party's decision regarding how to handle relationship deterioration may be relatively straightforward. For example, the advisor may simply encourage the student to work with someone else or the student might abandon the relationship on his or her own. However, when university officials assign students to specific mentors, as often is the case in online graduate education in the United States, handling deteriorating relationships may be more complex.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Numerous researchers have explored how individuals respond to relationship deterioration in a variety of settings using Rusbult et al.'s (1982) Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect (EVLN) typology (Aslan & Aydin, 2013; Grima & Glaymann, 2012; Hart & Rush, 2007; Hsiung & Yang, 2012; Lafer, 2014; Naus, van Iterson, & Roe, 2007; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous III, 1988; Rusbult, 1993). We chose this framework because we viewed our relationships with our protégé as critical relationships that required trust and attention, much like a romantic relationship. Our previous work on developing trust in the doctoral mentor-protégé relationship motivated us to examine our individual and collective work as mentors to not only establish trust, but to sustain and improve these relationships with our students.

The cause and severity of the relationship problem, perceived costs of exiting versus the attractiveness of other options, and levels of prior investment in the relationship all may contribute to the decision of how to respond to relationship deterioration (Halpern, 2017; Rusbult, 1993). The model includes two dimensions that, when crossed, result in four options. The first dimension reflects whether the individual adopts an active or passive approach. The second reflects whether the approach is constructive or destructive to the continuation of the relationship. When combined, they lead to the four different approaches: exit (active, destructive), voice (active, constructive), loyalty (passive, constructive), and neglect (passive, destructive). In considering how full-time, online dissertation mentors respond to relationship deterioration with their assigned protégés, the current study adds to the literature on applications of the EVLN model and provides critical information regarding the mentor point-of-view. We've provided a summary of each category below.

**Exit.** Once a relationship deteriorates, both parties may consider the destructive, active approach of exiting. Criticism (Li & Seale, 2007), differences in personalities, and even abusive behavior can be the cause (Hicks, 2011). Typically, by the time a doctoral student has reached the dissertation phase, the student has invested significant time and financial resources into pursuing the doctoral degree and the costs of exiting would be high. If the option is whether to exit the deteriorating relationship but stay at the university and work with another mentor, a doctoral student may be more likely to exit than if the alternative were to leave the university and abandon the doctoral degree altogether. A mentor who exits a relationship with a doctoral student protégé

probably risks less, given that the mentor still holds his or her degree and status regardless of whether the student completes a degree under that mentor's tutelage. However, the mentor who desires to exit but cannot do so because the student is an assigned doctoral protégé may have little choice but to work on repairing the relationship.

**Voice.** Individuals who adopt an active, constructive approach are exercising their voice in trying to repair the relationship. If the precipitating event is not insurmountable or unforgivable, then either or both parties may attempt to repair the relationship. Many authors who discuss the mentor-protégé relationship between dissertation mentors and doctoral students advocate that figuring out how to navigate the relationship productively may be in the best interest of the students (Gill & Burnard, 2008; Schniederjans, Schniederjans, & Levy, 2012). The costs associated with losing a graduate student may be quite high for a novice mentor who is pursuing promotion and tenure through the traditional academic system, especially if the mentor already has invested significant time in helping the graduate student develop skills and/or a dissertation study. For mentors locked into relationships with graduate students (e.g., due to university policies, for example), voice may be the only viable strategy, regardless of the cause of conflict or level of prior investment. Indeed, Rusbult (1993) suggested that highly dependent individuals would be more likely to work on improving the relationship in a constructive manner than use a destructive approach, such as exit or neglect.

**Loyalty.** When an individual adopts a passive, constructive approach, he or she is waiting for the relationship to improve. The cause of conflict may be external to either individual and either one or both may appreciate that with the passage of time the relationship might return to a more satisfying level. Interestingly, Drigotas, Whitney, and Rusbult (1995) found that mentor behaviors reflecting loyalty may go unnoticed by their students, suggesting that protégés may not be fully aware that a mentor is trying to demonstrate loyalty. Students who are in the dissertation phase of their studies often encounter challenges in scholarly writing or in executing the research required to earn the doctoral degree (Liechty, Schull, & Liao, 2009). Both experienced and novice mentors are likely to empathize if a doctoral student encounters common struggles, such as writer's block, as they themselves may have experienced similar difficulties. However, handling the subtle nuances associated with external events that doctoral students may experience, such as marriage, divorce, birth of a child, or death of a loved one, may require thoughtful consideration on the part of the mentor. Deciding to show loyalty may be a decision based more on empathy than on the costs or prior investment the mentor has in the relationship, regardless of whether the mentor and protégé are locked into the current relationship.

**Neglect.** At times, an individual may decide to pursue a passive, destructive end to an existing relationship. When emotion, practical constraints, or even legal considerations prohibit relationship exit as a viable option, an individual may choose the neglectful approach. Students who disengage from their doctoral studies, regardless of the reason, may risk falling into the neglected category. With the many demands on mentors' time, such as teaching courses, conducting research, and engaging in service, a student who disengages may elicit reciprocal disengagement by the mentor. When mentors have invested significant time and resources, negative feelings such as guilt or regret may propel them to reengage the student through voice rather than passively let the relationship end. However, as illustrated in Gearrity and Mertz (2012), mentors and protégés may interpret signs of apparent neglect (e.g., a temporary lapse in email communication) quite differently.

The EVLN (Rusbult, 1982) framework has not been applied previously to the doctoral mentor-protégé relationship. We felt that it offered a rich opportunity for understanding our own

work as dissertation mentors in order to study the causes, responses, outcomes, and implications of how to handle relationship deterioration with doctoral protégés in an online program in which students are assigned to mentors and both parties are expected to work diligently and collaboratively to resolve any matters of relationship complications.

### **Research Design and Method**

In this study, we used collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) to investigate how we, in our prior work as doctoral mentors at an online institution that assigned students to dissertation chairs, navigated the challenges associated with relationship deterioration with some of our student protégés. We also explored how the CAE processes of reflection and interrogation might shape our future responses to conflict so that we might improve our strategies for successful and satisfying mentoring outcomes.

Chang et al. (2013) spoke of the ability for CAE to provide space for “deeper learning about self and others” (p. 28). We reflected deeply in this work about our learning about our students and how we interacted with them. We also talked about our work together as doctoral dissertation chairs, and how we helped each other learn about mentor-protégé relationship, but also how we learned about each other. Thus, we used two cultural perspectives in framing the study. First, we looked at the culture of mentoring, and how the mentoring process in doctoral work becomes an integrated relationship between the mentor and the student protégé (Burner, 2014; Crawford, Randolph, & Yob, 2014; Damgaci & Aydin, 2014; deJanasz & Godshalk, 2013; Eller, Lev & Feurer, 2014; Trinkner, 2014). By integrated, we mean that the relationship only exists as part of the student’s work to earn a doctoral degree, and therefore represents a unique culture within which students and professors interact (Andrews, 2017). All work in the relationship exists to advance the student’s completion of their degree.

Second, we looked at our work as teachers in an online, for-profit doctoral institution. Particularly, the online component of our work (whether for-profit or not-for-profit) presented challenges of loneliness, isolation, and threats to self-esteem in guiding our students (Ersoy & Ugur, 2015; Ersoy, 2015; Dolan, 2011; Golden, 2016; Terosky & Heasley, 2015). As Dolan wrote, “The main issues of concern to [online] faculty are inadequate frequency and depth of communication regardless of the means used, whether online or face-to-face” (p. 66). As online faculty, we often felt undervalued, and that our perceptions and knowledge were underutilized in the development and improvement of online teaching and learning. This study was informed by our work with students and our work with each other, which in turn prompted our choice to use Rusbult’s framework of relationship deterioration.

#### **Research questions.**

1. What prompted the deterioration in the relationship?
2. How did the dissertation mentor respond?
3. What was the outcome of the mentor’s response to the relationship issue?
4. What are the implications for us as dissertation mentors for the future of how we work to restore “relationship satisfaction” in our mentor-protégé relationships?

We chose collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) for this study, because we believed that closer self-reflection and self-examination of our practices might yield improved understanding of how to improve doctoral mentor/student relationships, thus improving eventual student learning outcomes. As dissertation mentors, the four of us have celebrated and embraced our collective culture, although we have disparate backgrounds. Autoethnography is a connection to ourselves and our culture (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) “focuses on self-interrogation, but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team of

researchers” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 21). CAE allows multiple authors to participate in collective and cross-analytic questioning, which can encourage multivocality in reflection and collaborative process in self-analysis.

Chang wrote of the varied nature of data collection in CAE (p. 46). We modeled our approach after Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, and Militello (2008) where the researchers used a multi-step process that included “(a) an introductory discussion, (b) engagement in narrative writing, (c) a preliminary and collective analysis of emerging clusters, (d) further refinement of narratives, and (e) an analysis” (p. 810). We chose to use an iterative process involving what Chang called “autoethnographic conversations” (p. 46), in which researchers specifically decide to explore a common topic through conversations. We used specific archival data collection, which included anonymized examples of our own work, along with critical conversations, during which we shared our work and collaborated to provide critical questioning of each other’s work, and memo writing, in which we individually dissected our work and wrote summaries of events and feelings to share with the group.

**Cultural lenses.** Mentorship as a cultural practice has a lengthy research trajectory that includes multiple disciplines and perspectives (e.g., Baker & Pifer, 2011; Battaglia & Battaglia, 2016; Doyle, Jacobs, & Ryan, 2016; Mason, 2016). We chose specifically to focus on mentoring in the doctoral experience. As we discussed in our introduction, the doctoral mentoring experience was created primarily to socialize the doctoral student into the Academy. We noticed at our institution that many students expressed frustration at the lack of a cohesive relationship with their mentor, and a resulting lack of trust in the mentor’s ability to guide the student towards degree completion.

Additionally, the mentoring culture is uniquely connected to the culture of our online university. This culture is comprised primarily of faculty living in diverse contexts, and faculty who may have more than one job—either several adjunct positions for multiple universities; or as in our case, one primary job working as a faculty member at the online institution, and other practitioner-related jobs in areas such as counseling, program evaluation, or adjunct teaching. Having such disparate lives creates a complex culture between us as full-time online faculty, in that we navigate our relationships via online technologies, with fewer face-to-face interactions. In our case, all of us in this study worked to create relationships between us (as faculty) in which we shared experiences, ideas, and frustrations of teaching online. Online universities, particularly for-profit universities, emphasize student completion in response to close scrutiny by government, policy-making, and accrediting bodies. Each of us worked at the time with dozens of students; although most of these relationships were satisfactory, having even a few relationships deteriorate could have a profound effect on how effectively we could guide our collective groups of students. The nature and number of the mentor-protégé relationships at the institution were likely representative of similar online, for-profit institutions; dissertation chairs and students are assigned to each other by a third party. Thus, we selected our cases for examination directly from the subset of relationships that had begun deterioration.

**Beginning the process of self-examination.** During this initial process, we explored our relationships with our students and identified the subtle nuances of how we each handle relationship deterioration that we might not have been able to interpret by ourselves. We brought our individually chosen case summaries of troubling mentor-protégé relationships to the group, and we shared our thoughts and reflections on these examples as expressions of Rusbult’s exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect model. In each group session, as we listened to each other share our cases, we questioned each other, and we expressed empathy by recounting similar situations and

feelings. We also discussed where our experiences differed and suggested alternative reflections on the meaning of the experience. For example, in one session we were ruminating about difficult students and our frustration at trying to help our students. One of us exclaimed that she just wanted to “quit” being the student’s mentor, but that this was not an option in our university. The other group members expressed empathy and offered support for the despairing member; we offered suggestions for ways to address the student’s concerns, while respecting the faculty member’s personal boundaries (i.e., amount of time spent with each student due to a high student load, amount of verbal abuse that she was willing to tolerate, lack of rigor she was willing to tolerate in the student’s work).

As dissertation mentors, we differed in the way we approached the dissertation process and our relationships with our students. Some of us would spend an abundant amount of time on the phone with students, while others would write copious amounts of written and video feedback in student papers. Still others would provide multiple resources to students to try to meet the individual learning styles of each student. Collectively, we agreed that our most important job was to help the student align a research worthy problem, with a feasible research purpose and design. Our collective research methodology experience included both quantitative and multiple qualitative designs. These experiences and using CAE allowed us to examine our similarities and differences and learn from each other, particularly in how to negotiate and perhaps improve the relationships we have with our students.

**Selecting representative cases, sharing together, and writing individually.** We each chose two of our students to examine for this study: one representing Rusbult’s *exit* portrait (unplanned), and another to use specifically for the CAE analysis. Initial data sources included feedback and responses from our own work as doctoral mentors, and notes from when the four of us met to question and discuss our work. Secondary data included our individual summaries of the two relationships. To clarify, we were looking at how we as chairs attempted to understand the relationship and how the relationship fit within Rusbult’s model, but we were not examining the student’s perception. We specifically looked at instances within our relationship with each student and used our feedback and students’ responses to try to reflect upon what our motivations were, and if or how we worked to improve that relationship.

In our first meeting, we discussed the cases we selected, and which part of the model we were drawing upon as a framework to understand the mentor-protégé relationship. We talked about why we chose each student, and about the specific incident that prompted us to use the scenario as an example of how we perceived the relationship dissatisfaction with that student, taking field notes throughout our discussions as a third data source. We labeled each mentor-protégé relationship with one label from Rusbult’s model, and then agreed to present each case as a written vignette for our next meeting. We decided to use only one of our two examples because we felt that four student examples provided sufficient information for this study based upon our comparisons with Rusbult’s categories and our desire to delve further into these relationship issues with our students. Our fourth data source prior to analysis was our return to working individually on our cases to expand and elaborate, including any self-reflective questions we brought from the group.

**Returning for group analysis.** At the next meeting we read each other’s cases, took turns questioning each mentor about their students, and what prompted the choice and label. We asked, “Why did you choose this student?” and “Why did you choose this label from the EVLN model for how you responded to the deteriorating relationship?” Then, we asked that mentor deeper questions about that relationship, to try to get the mentor to elaborate on the nature of the

relationship and how the mentor-protégé interactions made them feel. We agreed to create more detailed case summaries so that we would have a concrete artifact that we could then further co-analyze when we came back together. Our challenge to each other in writing these cases was to answer questions of: 1) What happened; 2) Why do you think this happened; 3) Did you try to repair the relationship, and how; and, 4) If you could not repair the relationship, what did you do” (see Appendix for brief excerpts of our cases; the actual cases we shared had material that could be identifying, so we present anonymized, and edited versions for this paper).

Professor L. and Professor R. were both from an education background but had diverse experiences in context and content—one being from an agricultural background, while the other was from a music background. Professor J. was from a higher education background and had conducted historical studies from a feminist perspective. Finally, Professor B., an experimental psychologist, had extensive quantitative methods knowledge. Despite these differences in background and training, each of us responded similarly to troubling scenarios. For example, when Professor R. lamented her work with her student, and her catching the student plagiarizing large sections of literature, each of the others expressed their support and agreement in the way Professor R. addressed the issue with the student, which included extensive re-teaching, modeling examples, and a mandate for the student to take specific tutorials provided by the university about plagiarism, paraphrasing, and original work. Professor R. discussed how she felt threatened by the student, especially when the student wrote letters to the dean’s office and the provost’s office, suggesting that Professor R. wasn’t doing her job correctly. Each of the others shared that their empathy stemmed from experiencing similar scenarios in their work, and similar frustrations with feeling isolated from other faculty, and isolated from support of the university.

We used our meeting field notes, and our case summaries for the next phase of analysis. We used thematic analysis as a way of getting close to the data and developing deeper appreciation of the content. Thematic analysis was chosen as a useful and flexible method of qualitative analysis to draw from our diverse epistemologies and experiences as dissertation mentors. We were interested in looking for broader patterns in our work on which we could then conduct a more fine-grained analysis. We decided to break the group into dyads for analysis, so that we could come back together and see if the four of us could provide confirmability to the others’ work. First, two of us each with extensive qualitative research experience, separately read the cases and discussion notes. Those two decided to individually code, based upon each’s preference. One of the two used a two-pass cycle of coding: a) active word coding, such as “I mentor,” “I advise,” or “I work with advisees...” for example; b) literature-informed etic issues coding (Saldaña, 2014; Stake, 1995). These issues included the ideas of relationship deterioration and repair between mentor and protégé. The other incorporated grounded codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) as previous prejudices, presuppositions, and previous knowledge of the subject area were put aside and instead the author concentrated on finding new categories and patterns in the data not previously represented in the literature. Next, the initial two coders met to compare thoughts, and reduced codes to a list of themes to see how Rusbult’s theory related to online doctoral dissertation mentoring between dissertation mentor and protégé. Although the first two coders used different coding techniques, they came to quick agreement about the emergent themes drawn from the data. When we came back together as a group of four to continue our analysis, the first two shared the coded results with the other two researchers for discussion. We discussed what the original two coders had done and why, and where we could go together as a group for next steps. We felt that breaking apart for initial work allowed us some space to think and reflect on our own work, and on our own relationship case and what we learned from this process up to this point. When we reconvened as

a group of four, we each brought our own reflections back to the coding done by the initial coders, to expand upon and connect our work to implications for continuing as dissertation mentors. In the next section we share these themes, as evidenced by the data.

## **Results**

We discussed our results together over several meetings, and developed three themes that could possibly represent our feelings and thoughts about our relationships with our students. Each theme tied to the student's behavior and the impact that behavior had on our collective perception. Each theme represented our work as mentors and our work as part of an online for-profit institution. These themes helped us answer the four research questions. We will discuss these connections in the next section.

**Theme 1: Mentors empathize with protégé's situations.** Through our session meetings we discovered that we all try to empathize with our students. Empathy is our illustration of how we integrated the components of the EVLN model. We talked about anger, patience, and tolerance, and decided that for us these were all sub-constructs of empathy. For example, Professor J. demonstrated empathy in her work to achieve accommodations for her student's disability. She set aside all the negative problems the student had with the university in not receiving accommodations and helped the student to focus on the dissertation and academic progress. Professor J.'s empathy also helped her direct the student to the correct department to handle the student's disability-related concerns.

In Professor B.'s example of loyalty, she shared her story of a student's mother passing away. Because Professor B. had experienced a similar life event, her level of empathy rose. She connected with that student, understood some of the complexities of the situation, and experienced feelings of compassion. Her empathy helped her maintain patience with the student, although by being overly patient and loyal she discussed how she might not have served the student's best interests from an educational point of view. Instead, she may have allowed the student to linger in an unproductive state for too long.

**Theme 2: Student behavior and changes in our empathy.** Additionally, we discovered that each of us reported experiencing fluctuations in our levels of empathy in response to each student's actions and attitudes. Professor L. expressed how her empathy disappeared, largely due to her student's negative behavior and resistance to accepting constructive feedback given to help the student improve. Together we discussed how a mentor can have empathy, but still have negative feelings towards the student; but when empathy dissolves into anger, this undermines the relationship and leads to a desire to exit the relationship.

Professor R. noted her loss of empathy resulting from her student's behavior and the student's increasingly unreasonable demands on Professor R.'s time. Despite this, Professor R. continued to provide formal, constructive feedback to the student, in part because she felt her duties obligated her to do so. Professor R. also wanted to demonstrate that she maintained the highest standards of professionalism even if she neglected to try to repair the connection with the student. Professor R. noted that when she discovered her student had plagiarized large portions of work, she found it challenging to stay supportive of the student. When Professor R. expressed feelings of sadness at failing the student, the remaining three of us in the group empathized with Professor R., but also encouraged her that she was providing as much support as she could for the student.

We decided that these themes, when taken together, suggest that empathy plays a central role in how we each responded to relationship deterioration or repair with our students; additionally, we found that empathy was something we exhibited with each other, as faculty. Empathy was not something we felt automatically or an emotion that we had control over when



student behavior became confrontational. However, we felt empathy as we tried to work to repair the relationship. Reflecting on these cases using autoethnographic methods helped increase our awareness of the critical role of empathy in the mentor-protégé relationship and in our work together as faculty.

**Theme 3: Empathy, as multi-faceted construct in our work.** When thinking about empathizing as a mentor we decided that means to put yourself in the shoes of the student. Professor J. remembered one student of hers who was visually handicapped and had multiple frustrations with other dissertation chairs not understanding the challenges the student had to overcome to complete a dissertation. The student felt that previous chairs did not care about the student's disability. Professor J. stated, "I tried to think about what it would be like if I couldn't read feedback from my chair. I also thought about all the challenges in writing a dissertation. I had empathy for him, because I knew the difficulty of writing a dissertation without a visual handicap. I admired him because I thought he was taking on a difficult, challenging task." Professor J. realized she had to work to present her empathy to the student in a way that would help the student progress. Professor J. remembers taking the time to go over her comments with the student on the phone. Professor J. felt that it was critical to the success of the student for her to exhibit empathy as a mentor and bring her own memories of being a doctoral student into her interactions with this student.

When thinking about empathy in the context of an online for-profit institution, we were surprised to find this theme in our work, due to the nature of administrative guidelines to confine our work to academics. This meant that students have their own academic advisor each of whom is tasked with addressing student emotional, financial and other needs. But, our work, as the dissertation chair was supposed to be confined to academic considerations, such as writing style, APA formatting, content, research design, and dissertation milestone completion. What we found, however, was that students often *intertwined* their perceptions of us as chairs, with our ability to listen and advocate for them in academic, and emotional issues. Students expected us to include both academics and social/emotional support as part of our work. We found also that these expectations extended beyond students to include administration and staff. Professor R. remembered, "I had a conversation with an administrative assistant who assigned students to us, and she pointedly assigned me a student who was angry with the university over administrative mistakes which had occurred before I started working with the student. As the administrative assistant explained to me, she felt that I would be able to talk with the student, provide a sense of calmness for the student, and be able to help the student transcend their anger, and progress in the dissertation." While far from the initial mandate to "just stick to academics," Professor R. and the administrative staff member felt that the student could progress if someone would listen to the student—someone who could empathize.

## **Discussion**

Through the reflective exercise of CAE, we found varied causes for the deterioration in mentor-protégé relationships. Sometimes, interpersonal conflict was the cause, such as Professor L.'s interactions with a rude and hostile student. Past literature has shown that the feelings of doctoral students during the dissertation process can be fluid and can change throughout the process, often based upon the interactions between the mentor and protégé. For example, Gearity and Mertz (2012) and Wayessa (2017) wrote about their unique experiences together, because they felt that examining what the other was feeling during this process could help facilitate the student's persistence and completion of the dissertation. The authors completed a duo-auto-ethnography to present the story of their journey together as mentor and protégé. While the student's initial

perceptions appeared that he harbored hostility towards his mentor, he ultimately realized that each were including preconceptions about the others' behavior and prior knowledge into their responses. While the mentor perceived she was giving substantive, guiding feedback, the student perceived this feedback as an evaluation of the student's ability to continue in doctoral studies. The student reflected, "Apparently after four years of being a doctoral student, I have become completely incompetent. I don't need this shit" (p. 6). Had the interactions between the two not returned the relationship to a more satisfying state, the student surely would have dropped out.

Similarly, Professor R. continued to attempt to repair the relationship with her student, despite the student's continued hostile behavior. Because of this, we believe our outcomes with deteriorating relationships were different than Rusbult's original discussion. Neglect meant different behavior for Professor R. than Rusbult's definition of ignoring or neglecting a relationship. After repeated attempts to help the student understand and alter their behavior (empathetic listening), Professor R. felt that the only way to continue was to provide substantive, but professional feedback. Professor R. no longer invested time in trying to repair the relationship, but neglected the relationship in favor of "sticking to the rules," and providing constant feedback related to the content of the dissertation only. This type of "neglect" demonstrates a continuation of the relationship, unlike Rusbult's description of ignoring the relationship.

Other causes of relationship deterioration were reflected in student life circumstances that students revealed to their mentor, such as a disability or death in the family. While life circumstances happen to everyone, Samuel and Kohun (2010) Carothers and Parfitt (2017) pointed out that the very process of executing a dissertation was an additional source of anxiety and was a "discomfort zone" in which students must display a wide variety of coping mechanisms. When you add the dissertation anxiety to regular life circumstances, especially extreme ones, the relationship between the mentor and protégé may become more stressful or deteriorate. What Samuel and Kohun found is that faculty can facilitate student success by assessing each student's individual coping mechanisms and interacting appropriately to support the student. We've demonstrated that our finding of *empathy* represents this type of faculty perception that Samuel and Kohun suggested, in that we all worked to put ourselves in the circumstance of the student and to provide (where possible) coping mechanisms and suggestions for problem solving, while continuing to act appropriately with each student.

Other researchers supported this idea of an empathetic mentor. Tenenbaum, Crosby and Gliner (2001) found that the more socioemotional support a mentor provides for a graduate student, the more satisfied the student becomes with the mentor and the overall graduate student experience. Elcigil and Sari (2008) found in their study on students' opinions and expectations about effective mentors that chairs should not only require students to conduct their own research, and provide students with information, but they need to exhibit empathy towards students as well and provide positive and encouraging feedback. Depending on the comfort level between the student and mentor, exchange of personal information may or may not occur. Expressing empathy towards a student without knowing their specific life circumstances may go a long way in keeping the student engaged.

The different causes appear to have elicited slightly different responses on the part of the mentors, although all mentors continued to provide professional direction to the students throughout the periods of relationship deterioration. Burkard et al. (2014) discovered that the relationships formed between mentors and their students were an important component in the positive or negative experiences for the student, but the student's attitude greatly affected the direction the relationship would take. Similarly, Barnes et al. (2010) found that mentors who were

accessible and helpful, who socialized with their students by way of aiding in professional development activities and connections with others in the field, and who were caring or showed empathy to their students formed positive relationships than those who were unhelpful, uninterested or inaccessible.

The outcomes also varied in each case, but we collectively agreed that successful completion of a dissertation was not necessarily the same as a successful outcome. For example, Professor J. considered her student's completion of the concept paper as a successful outcome. The student had struggled for over a year in trying to finish the concept paper, a required element before the student could advance to the formal proposal stage. Professor J. found that small advancements in the overall dissertation process needed to be celebrated as important milestones and consequently changed her method of measuring success for the individual student. This resulted in a display of empathy in that Professor J. recalibrated her expectations to accommodate the student's ability and past negative experiences with the university.

We also consider that the process of completing this CAE has positive implications for how we might work to restore relationship satisfaction in our mentor-protégé relationships in the future, given that we each have experienced a heightened awareness of the importance of empathy. In our next section, we provide implications we drew from our study for the mentoring of online doctoral students, and for the use of CAE for the improvement of mentoring practice. Particularly, we believe that CAE is an iterative reflective practice, much like action research in that we are working towards the improvement of our practice and these procedures are woven into our practice, and not a mere add-on for research purposes.

As we reflected on the original research questions, we arrived at the following answers.

#### **Research questions and brief answers.**

**1.** What prompted the deterioration in the relationship? We found that the causes for relationship deterioration varied but were consistent with what has been reported in the literature on the topic of mentor-protégé relationships. We experienced interpersonal conflict due to differing expectations, personalities, and needs, as well as the additional of major negative life events such as the death of a student's loved one.

**2.** How did the dissertation mentor respond? In all cases, despite the varied causes of the relationship deterioration, we responded in what we consider to be the most professional manner possible with our students given their individual situations. Although we each responded professionally in our interactions with the students, we all were deeply affected by the deteriorating relationships. Our autoethnographic conversations with each other revealed the impact that these interactions had on us, both positive and negative, in ways that we did not necessarily share with our students.

**3.** What was the outcome of the mentor's response to the relationship issue? We consider the outcomes of each of the relationships we focused on to have been successful outcomes. We broadened our definition of successful outcomes to include achieving certain milestones or getting needed disability support rather than solely the completion and defense of the final dissertation.

**4.** What are the implications for us as dissertation mentors for the future of how we work to restore "relationship satisfaction" in our mentor-protégé relationships? We believe that after having used CAE to examine relationship deterioration within the framework of the EVLN model we have become more self-aware of how our empathy ebbs and flows in response to our dynamic interactions with students as opposed to empathy being a trait we each have with some stable amount. This awareness can help us be better able to identify deteriorating relationships in the future and to respond in thoughtful ways that promote a successful outcome.

## **Implications**

**The significance of empathy for doctoral student success.** In this study, we reflected on and confirmed the importance of empathy in the mentor's role in guiding students through their doctoral studies online. Through the demonstration of high levels of empathy towards the student, dissertation mentors either can contribute actively or passively to a mutual goal of a student completing the dissertation. We also facilitated our students' progress by de-emphasizing our students' negative behavior and offering emotional support for the inevitable challenges that doctoral students will experience. Li and Seale (2007) found that doctoral advisors engaged in a variety of strategies for support and repair in mentor-protégé relationships, including providing advice, using humor, and strategically disengaging from dialogue that was likely to increase conflict. Consistent with findings from work by Yob and Crawford (2012) and Crawford, Randolph, and Yob (2014) and Deniz and Ersoy (2016) results from our study also suggest the importance of dissertation mentors extending their support to their student protégés throughout the doctoral journey in both psychosocial and academic domains.

The socialization of doctoral students into the process of becoming independent scholars can result in learning success at a variety of levels. Protégés who successfully complete their degree programs and become peers can apply skills acquired through their doctoral studies to their individual fields. Moreover, when they mentor their own doctoral students, they may find it useful to adopt strategies that they found particularly helpful for them when they were developing into independent scholars. By us modeling empathy, we hope that the next generation of doctoral students passes on the expression of the trait in the mentor-protégé relationship. While Gardner (2010) found that faculty did not appreciate the importance of their own role in the socialization process, we believe that our use of CAE to study relationship deterioration and repair has helped us see how our own actions influence the socialization of our doctoral students. Additionally, our use of the EVLN model (Rusbult, 1982) helped us understand the critical role that empathy can play in the success of the mentor-protégé relationship.

**The significance of reflective practice to doctoral teaching: Using CAE.** Our findings suggest that reflecting on instances of relationship deterioration might aid dissertation mentors in making their own levels of empathy salient. Much like action research (See, for example, Pine, 2009; Schön, 1983) reflection is an integral part of CAE (Chang et al., 2013) and requires participants to deeply consider choices, actions, attitudes, and behaviors. The reflections throughout and from different perspectives are crucial to developing better understanding of ourselves and, in this case, our students. These changes in us as researchers and practitioners are then part of the catalyst for the continuing cycle of reflexive activity, demonstrating what Chang et al. (2013) referred to as an iterative process. Iterative cycles of research are concurrent with many models of action research, and collaborative action research. As we change we see problems in context that we might not have seen before. Pine (2009) stated that “doing action research requires self-reflexivity and attention to our own practice. . .through [reflective activities] we can give voice to the silenced parts of our lives, discover what sustains and supports us, learn about self as constant and changing and who we are as the people behind the research we do” (p. 202). Using CAE to reflect as a group helped us discover how complex this reflective practice is, how vital it is to our continuous improvement as teachers, and how the practice changes us as practitioners.

Pine (2009) asserted that “in collaborative action research, knowledge is developed through relationships with others” (p. 118). The four of us set aside time to talk about what was happening in the project. This conversational activity may be what Pine referred to as a requirement of

collaborative action research, and of CAE. “The great strength inherent in collaborative reflection is its requirement for dialogue. Without dialogue, there is no collaborative reflection . . . Dialogue with others is essential to critically examine one’s ideas, beliefs, values, and performance” (p. 187). Our conversations helped move us from private to public to private reflections, and helped to change our perspective about ourselves, each other, and our teaching. Internal dialogues can be powerful tools to help us transform ourselves and our practice. When the inward dialogues become outward (public) and are ongoing (returning to private) we are self-strengthened in our beliefs and our own power to change our contexts.

**The significance of support for online faculty: Leaning on each other.** Importantly, we recognize that our support for each other was significant to us as mentors, as well as to our students. Although we did not have a formalized system within the university for sharing and support (other than weekly faculty meetings, which tended to be lists of current or changed university policies), we developed our own network using a social networking platform. The platform grew to over 60 faculty, and was open 24 hours a day/7 days a week. Faculty could enter or exit as they wished, and could ask questions about academics, about students, about resources, or any other issues. We found that at times we used the medium for emotional venting, as the separation of working in isolation, without significant representation within the university was daunting to some of us. We began to think of our network as our virtual “water cooler.” We could meet, chat for a moment with another colleague, and then go on with our work in the isolation of our home offices.

Later, we developed a large repository in a cloud-based system of methodological and writing resources that we shared amongst each other to benefit the progress of students. What began as a shared folder, eventually became a large repository with over 15 sub-folders, and many references and connections to scholarly literature and methodological experts. We also had folders that helped each other deal with students who had academic or behavior problems. We had folders on working with committees, and completing processes (that were ever-changing) related to dissertation completion. Eventually, as the university evolved to connect the dissertation chairs with content faculty, we had folders to support faculty in the content areas.

Other researchers have noted the need for universities to recognize that online faculty would benefit from a social support network for their own growth and development as faculty (Michou et al., 2016). Terosky and Heasley (2015) examined the need for social support in their qualitative study of faculty transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching, and concurred that faculty “wanted a greater sense of community and collegiality” (p. 155). Barefield and Meyer (2013) studied social support and other issues in online programs, particularly examining how leadership can address these issues, and concluded, “Leaders at all levels of administration need to be mindful that while online programs provide significant growth potential with little need for added physical space, careful consideration needs to be given to the faculty and student support structure in order to achieve maximum effectiveness” (p. 6). Importantly, including faculty in decisions on how these systems would best work for faculty needs might in and of itself increase faculty morale and integration into large institutions, especially when such faculty are geographically dispersed (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

We understand that research relies on the honest responses of participants. In CAE, the quality of the data becomes less valid if participants are not willing to be open with each other and transparent in their feelings and thought processes. This can limit the extent to which team members can explore and analyze the content of the data. However, we had a high level of trust and collegiality given that we had worked together for over 3 years for the same online university.

Although we are now dispersed to different universities, we still manage to have regular communications with each other about our student cohorts and to discuss our mentoring styles. Hence, we felt comfortable sharing vulnerabilities in our mentoring approaches, and we believe that such intimacy led to the full disclosure of data.

Future research might address the utility of using empathy training with both mentors and protégés. In a recent meta-analysis of 19 studies, van Berkhout and Malouff (2015) found the effect of empathy training on subsequent empathy levels to be robust. Effective in undercutting stereotyping (Galinsky & Moscovitz, 2000; Yigit & Tatch, 2017) and in decreasing prejudice (Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003), providing explicit training in perspective-taking might be beneficial for both parties, especially if the mentor and protégé are from vastly different backgrounds. In their research with nursing students, Elcigil and Sair (2006) found that nursing students reported wanting empathy from their mentors, as they felt that displays of mentor empathy were motivating. Therefore, research on how empathy training affects empathy levels of both mentors and doctoral student protégés may be a valuable direction to pursue in future studies.

Additionally, future research might consider the unique perspective that online doctoral students at for-profit institutions have on how they experience relationship deterioration. To the extent that higher education, and to a lesser extent graduate education, has become commodified, students may experience different types of relationship dissatisfaction than they might at brick-and-mortar or not-for-profit schools. Moreover, the medium of communication is often via phone, email, or electronic messaging, which may lead to more expressions of dissatisfaction than might be encountered in a face-to-face environment and relationship. Adding information on the student perspective can help us better understand the more complete dynamics of the relationship.

### **Conclusion**

By using CAE, we reflected and examined our behaviors within troubled mentor/student relationships. CAE as a method allowed us to question one another and examine our experiences to better understand our previously un-vocalized thoughts and actions about each relationship. We believe that the use of CAE could also extend to groups of mentors and protégés working together to reflect individually and collaboratively about the process of doctoral learning. “Overall, CAE has the potential to be used in diverse ways, and can therefore generate co-created knowledge that is actionable, personally meaningful, and empowering for all involved” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 149). We found CAE helped us to discover ways to improve our empathy, reflect professionally, and work to repair troubled student relationships.

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## Appendix

### Case Summaries

**Professor L. and Student A. (Exit).** A. was resistant to all recommendations by both me and the methodologist on the committee to help her improve her dissertation proposal. I had several calls with her and a conference call with both her and the methodologist and she was overtly rude. A. asked for a change in her methodologist. I did not support her request, in part because A. refused to acknowledge that she needed to become an expert in her selected design. Rather than just doing the work, she tried to find a work around. A. also maligned my character to other students. I secretly wanted her to petition for a change of mentors as I felt that the relationship has been damaged beyond repair. However, I continued to provide her with encouragement and direction in pursuing her doctorate.

**Professor J. and Student M. (Voice).** When I first started to work with M., I learned that many other mentors had refused to work with him. He had threatened a discrimination lawsuit against the university. He complained to me about how much he hated the university and how unfair people had been to him. Related to the threatened lawsuit, M. equated his need for disability accommodations as the reason he was not progressing in his dissertation journey. I perceived M.'s work output as the reason for his lack of progress. My strategy was to focus on academics and not on any other issues, and so I directed him to the correct offices for his disability-related concerns. Over time, I was able to help M. refocus and move him forward in completing his first milestone document, the concept paper. I eventually got him accepted into a special program at the university where he could receive extra mentoring and advising. We left on very good terms and he was very appreciative of my help. Setting professional boundaries with M. seemed to be the key to moving him forward successfully in completing a milestone document.

**Professor B. and Student H. (Loyalty).** H. had been caring for her terminally ill mother in her home. Numerous times, she simply could not work, but she was always making progress. H. had some problems in the plagiarism reports when I submitted her work to the software our institution used to help students see where they are improperly citing academic work. I responded patiently, providing instruction on how to correct the problems and assuring H. that I was confident that she could correct the issues. H.'s mother passed away and she asked me to be patient and still support her in the dissertation process to which I agreed. H. finished her dissertation proposal at the time of this writing.

**Professor R. and Student B. (Neglect).** B. came from a military background. My initial approach was to be direct and formal with her, as that had worked for many of my other military students. B. began our relationship, however, by attacking my professional expertise. She demanded that I place her papers before others, provide copyediting services, and even re-write passages for her. On multiple occasions, I found instances of direct copying from other sources in B.'s work. As I prepared an academic integrity violation report, she complained to my superiors that I did not conduct myself appropriately, did not return work on time, and did not give her substantive feedback. Fortunately, I had documented all of my communication and feedback electronically in the course room. Meanwhile, I continued to reply to correspondence and give feedback on drafts of her documents. While I "neglected" our relationship in that I no longer tried to repair it, I "invested" myself in documenting correspondence and providing the most professional level of feedback possible. As I disconnected, I hoped the university officials would dismiss the student.