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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the potential contributions that an arts mentoring program can make to the support of artists and creative practitioners contending with the challenges of the post-pandemic creative sector. In so doing, it also considers possible criticisms of the efficacy of arts mentoring, given the uncertainty and precariousness that characterise careers in the cultural sector. To explore these ideas, the paper presents an analysis of interview data from research on a recent arts mentoring program in Australia. Utilising the concept of 'affective practice' from critical discursive psychology, the paper argues that the benefits of mentoring go beyond practical contributions like skills guidance or 'gate opening' by mentors. Additionally, a mentoring program can function as a site in which the 'feeling experiences' that derive from the cultural and personal associations of a creative or artistic practice can be reinforced, through the program itself and through the relationship between mentor and mentee, potentially strengthening artistic and creative activities and their practitioners, and thereby perpetuating the survival and growth of contemporary art worlds.

Introduction

Even before the new challenges to the cultural sector presented by the Covid pandemic (see *Cultural Trends* 30.1; also Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2021; Walmsley et al. 2022), the precariousness of artistic and creative work was recognised and widely acknowledged. Many researchers have reported on the inequalities that persist within the creative sector, the mismatch between effort and reward, and the uncertainty of career trajectories in which effort and length of involvement provide little guarantee of (eventual) recognition or financial success. While accepting that many of these difficulties will only be remedied by substantial state support to sustain the cultural sector in post-pandemic contexts (see O'Connor 2021), this paper considers an additional form of support that is increasingly offered by both private and public organisations, that of mentoring (e.g. Australia Council for the Arts and AltusQ 2016).

Much of the existing research has considered mentoring programs in the contexts of corporate or government sectors, not the more precarious and less formalised world of creative careers. Indeed, the general model of mentoring, as an arrangement in which a more experienced professional or practitioner guides a career entrant or relative novice (both of whom are assumed to be already paid for their time, or at least be receiving some kind of salary), is potentially complicated by an artistic or

creative focus. One issue is the uncertain employment and earning situations of most creative practitioners. Another is that artistic and creative practices are strongly associated with 'extra-rational' feelings and experience, including 'fascination' (Reckwitz 2017), 'transcendence' (Taylor and Paludan 2019), and the promise of self-actualisation (Maslow 1962), that are highly personal to the practitioner. These, and other issues, put in question how far practical guidance and the example of a different person's experience can be relevant to a mentee.

This paper proposes that creative and arts mentoring provides benefits that go beyond the purely instrumental or practical. The paper assumes a complex creative process in which 'doing' and 'feeling' are not neatly separable but inevitably connected and contextualised. Following from the concept of 'affective practice' from critical discursive psychology (e.g. Calder-Dawe et al. 2021; Martinussen and Wetherell 2019, 2021; Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018), the paper proposes that creative mentoring is a site in which creative experience, including its 'felt' aspects, can be affirmed and reinforced, assisting mentees to take up new 'affective positions' around creativity and carry these forward. By reinforcing the mentees' complex experiences around engagement in artistic and creative activities, the potential contribution of a mentoring program is therefore to support their continuing and developing creative practice and, on a larger scale, to perpetuate the survival and growth of contemporary art worlds, even in the face of continuing economic and social challenges.

The first section of the paper reviews recent research on creative and arts mentoring projects. The concepts of affect and affective practice are then discussed in some detail to show their relevance. The paper introduces the Australian arts mentoring program which was the focus of our research project, describes the data collection and introduces our interpretive analytic approach. The section on data analysis explores mentee participants' talk about the feelings and emotions, achievement and progress in a creative career, and the relationship between mentor and mentee. The final sections discuss the research findings and our conclusions.

The contributions of arts mentoring

Recent research on creative and arts mentoring focuses largely on the practical benefits that mentors can offer to mentees, thereby following the general model of mentoring already outlined. For example, Hope et al. (2020), studying mentoring for 'emerging Australian female and gender minority composers to create new compositions for performance' (p. 49), found that mentorships had value as vehicles for networking, recognition and 'getting a foot in the door'. The researchers emphasise that the informal career progression pathways of creative employment can be more about 'who you know' than 'what you know'. For their mentees, touring with mentors facilitated networking, with the mentors themselves and their wider circles of contacts. In addition, mentees noted how observing a mentor at work demonstrated practical skills, such as efficient time use and effective communication and interactions in rehearsals (Hope et al. 2020, 54). Bacon (2016) also discusses the gate-keeping and opportunity-enabling role of mentors (broadly conceived) for creative practitioners. Haugsevje et al. (2021) studied the roles of 'facilitators' in creating their own projects and supporting others through generating networks, alliances, projects and activities. The researchers concluded that the facilitators were aware of their responsibilities as 'powerful gate-keepers who control the access to limited resources' (p. 85). Writers and artist educators Sharanpal Ruprai and Sheniz Janmohamed similarly identify significant career-enabling gatekeepers and advisors as essential to career development (Ruprai and Janmohamed 2019). Yoon (2021) found that networking, collaboration opportunities and skills development were all valued outcomes of a mentoring program for artists with a cognitive disability.

A point of interest for this paper is that such practical benefits often have a 'felt', perhaps emotional aspect and, indeed, are inseparable from it. For instance, Annette Naudin (2018), researching networking among 'cultural entrepreneurs', notes the usefulness for practitioners of observing other people's successful activities because, as one of her participants describes it,

a network can function as a map and trajectory combined: what others have already done, he may do next. This usefulness assumes, of course, that the 'others' are people the observer admires and wants to follow. Similarly, when Bilton et al. (2021) draw attention to the potential positive contributions of 'outside voices', such as mentors and audiences, these voices are assumed to be ones which their participants respect: 'Teachers and mentors, in particular, had played critical roles in giving permission for creative practice to be taken seriously, often by facilitating transitions from a private world of imaginative play to public expression.' (p. 743). Mentees will also, of course, respond to more negative feelings: the same researchers note that outside voices can discourage as well as encourage a creative practice, as in the example of critical feedback that put off a writer for many years.

Some research has more directly addressed the 'feeling' elements of creative mentorships, particularly in work which focusses specifically on mentoring programs for artists and other creatives with a disability and/or for whom creative employment is not their main source of income. In an otherwise skills-focused evaluation of a film internship program for people with intellectual disability, Dew et al. (2023) refer to how involvement in the program played a key role in building mentees' confidence. Buckley et al. (2022), examining the value of professional mentoring to autistic performing arts professionals, note that many participants valued the experience for increasing their self-belief, and also for making them feel less isolated and alone (p.5460). Another project found that although mentees valued the opportunity to learn new art forms and skills, meet new people and develop relationships, the outcomes they emphasised were more personal and less tangible: 'pride in work produced, increased motivation and inspiration, increased confidence and sense of purpose, working more independently and becoming more aware of their potential as a professional artist' (DADAA Inc 2014, 5).

In most of these accounts, there is a noticeable tendency to link creativity with positive experiences (confidence, self-belief, pride). Bilton et al attribute this to classic psychology models of creative motivation which focused on single tasks. The intrinsic creative motivation for such tasks was, supposedly, the possibility of 'autonomous pleasurable task immersion' (Bilton, Ruth Eikhof, and Gilmore 2021, 739) which could be disrupted by negative extrinsic motivations, such as the need to earn money. Bilton et al argue that these psychology models initiated a dichotomy between, on the one hand, 'good' creative activities driven by intrinsic motivation and, on the other, bad extrinsic anti-creative pressures. Further, they suggest that the dichotomy has been perpetuated in many widely accepted accounts of creative work, promoting assumptions that unconstrained creative work will be pleasurable 'good work' (e.g. Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011), and that the aspiration to achieve that kind of 'good work' will motivate creative workers to tolerate negative external circumstances (e.g. McRobbie 2002, 2016). In contrast, Bilton et al propose an alternative account of a complex creative process that is intrinsically motivated but can involve painful and difficult experiences as well as pleasure and satisfaction. Moreover, they suggest that creative workers and practitioners learn to self-manage these different experiences by using both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of the creative process. For example, external deadlines can be useful for forcing the practitioner to get through creative difficulties, and the creative process can be effectively fitted around routines, like those involved in childcare.

This more complex account of the creative process does not of course deny the difficulties that arise from precarious employment and limited rewards, but it puts in question some idealised or 'Romantic' (McRobbie 1998) depictions of creativity and creative work. Bilton et al's alternative account has several implications for understanding the possible contributions of a creative mentoring program. First, by challenging any separation between creative activity, with its association of the intrinsic, personal and pleasurable, and other activities within a creative worker's experience which might be considered uncreative, practical and mundane, the account confirms the relevance of addressing these latter aspects in a mentorship program: in Bilton et al's conceptualisation, these more prosaic aspects are also part of the creative process, not separate to it. Second, their account invites greater attention to the difficulties faced by creative practitioners. These cannot all be

attributed to precarious employment and nor will they be directly remedied by improved financial support. In short, the account invites greater attention to how arts mentoring can address the inevitable difficulties of being creative. Third and relatedly, the account invites a reconceptualisation of the creative process to include both negative and positive feeling experiences. In this paper we utilise the concepts of affect and, particularly, 'affective practice' in order to consider such experiences.

Affect and affective practice

Theories of affect generally consider relationality and potential interconnections that people may experience through the body and senses, and as 'other than conscious' (Seigworth and Gregg, p. 1). Seigworth and Gregg (2010) associate affect with 'forces' that operate between people, defining it in terms of 'potential', action and being acted upon. Similarly, Wetherell (2012) summarises the general concerns of affect theories as 'influence, movement and change' (p.2). Many accounts are concerned with negative manifestations of affect on a large scale or social level, as in group hysteria, public protests and hate movements (see Wetherell 2012 for discussion). In the psychology discipline, affect is often linked to discussions of emotion because of the apparent overlap of experiences that go beyond rational thought, are linked to body actions and reactions (such as laughing and crying) and may drive or inhibit action (examples might be anger or fear). The concept of affect contrasts with more conventional psychological premises of an 'interiorized self or subjectivity' and 'individualized actants possessing . . . *solely private emotions* within a scene or environment' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.8: emphasis added). Affect offers, instead, a conceptualisation of people being driven, or constrained, by feelings and emotions that arise from larger social contexts. Some psychologists consider affect in relation to 'critical discourses of the emotions' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.8) which challenge the individualist theories that base emotion in contained biological or psychic mechanisms.

We set out the concept of affect in some detail because of its implications for our concern with the contemporary cultural and creative industries and creative or artistic mentoring. Mentoring has a clear role in promoting the practical aspects of developing a creative career, which might include acquiring relevant skills and engaging with the established traditions, communities and structures of support, evaluation and gatekeeping that Howard S. Becker (1982) has termed 'art worlds'. However, as we have noted, creativity is highly personal, associated with 'feeling' as well as 'doing'. Multiple studies of contemporary creative workers and practitioners have shown that they are commonly understood, and understand themselves, to possess a will or drive to engage in creative activities and a feeling of creative potential, sometimes colloquially referred to as talent. The promised or hoped for return from being creative is the attainment of fulfilment or self-actualisation, although, as discussed, Bilton et al. (2021) note that being creative also involves engagement with difficulties and negative feelings. We argue in this paper that mentoring can be a site in which the 'felt' aspects of being creative can be affirmed and reinforced, with implications for a mentee continuing in their practice. We draw on the concept of 'affective practice' from critical discursive psychology to understand how mentoring promotes the entanglement of 'affect, meaning-making and cognition' around being creative (Wetherell 2012, 148).

Critical discursive social psychologists (e.g. Taylor 2015; Wetherell 1998) assume that the shared and already existing social meanings that shape intersubjective and co-constructed experience carry a loading of associations that derive from multiple contexts: 'the accrued associations . . . are carried through the use and re-use of language into new situations and encounters' (Taylor 2015).[1] Moreover, these associations are not limited to the kinds of meanings, conscious and open to rational negotiation, that are considered in more conventional areas of discourse studies. Instead, the associations are understood to be inseparable from the level of experience that is encompassed in accounts of emotion or of the 'visceral' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.1) and extra-rational influence of affect. This assumption is extended in the concept of 'affective practice', defined as 'a

figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning making and with other social and material figurations' (Wetherell 2012, 19; see also Wetherell, McConville, and McCreanor 2020; Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018). This concept challenges any separation between meanings and bodily experience, or 'turbulence'. Wetherell (2012) argues that 'formulations of affect which divide the making of meaning from the hit of events on bodies . . . fail to appreciate the ways in which the mobilising of meaning and the registration of turbulence are inextricably tangled.' (106). We propose that being creative, whether in general terms or as an engagement with a specific recognised creative practice (such as painting or glassmaking) can be understood as such a figuration or affective practice, involving inseparable experiences of 'doing' and 'turbulence'.

The concept of affective practice also challenges a metaphor of people caught up in formless and powerful flows of affect. Instead, it 'draws attention to affect and emotion that is regular if not always routine, . . . relatively predictably ordered and patterned, socially consequential and bound up with ongoing social relations.' (Martinussen and Wetherell, 2019: pp 106–7: emphasis added). Moreover, the concept suggests that the patterning, for example, of a particular creative practice, can be reinforced in a process of transmission equivalent to the 'influence' that affect theorists postulate as variously driving and inhibiting movement and change. For the mentees whose talk we analyse, feelings, thoughts and actions become linked within affective positions associated with creativity that have themselves been promoted within a creative mentoring programme. Mentoring is a site in which mentees can take up these positions and acquire 'affective habits and associations' (155) to be carried forward into new situations. We propose that the engagement between mentor and mentee on a creative mentoring programme can contribute to (or in negative interactions possibly inhibit) the transmission and reinforcement of connections of 'doing' and 'feeling' around being creative.

Another point of interest for our research is that this process of transmission suggests the possibility of change in the figuration over time. 'Affective practice is something that can be encountered as a pre-existing given . . . but it is also something that is actively created and needs work to sustain' (Wetherell 2012, 142). The patterns encompassed in the figuration become modified, for instance, as different meanings and claims are asserted and reinforced, contributing to new 'affective positions' to be taken up (p.148). We suggest that creative mentoring can promote such development and modification in relation to creative practice, for individual mentees and, on a broader level, across wider social and cultural fields as new people and creative practices enter existing art worlds. Finally, we suggest that creative mentoring, as a form of doing implicated with the entangling of 'body possibilities and routines' and 'meaning making' around creative practice and associated social and material figurations, such as particular creative fields and art worlds can itself be understood as an affective practice.

The research project

This paper presents research on an Australian mentorship program for creative practitioners in visual arts, craft, performance, composition, and design practice. A full account of the Australian employment and cultural policy context is beyond the scope of the paper (see, for example, Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2021), but some key points can be indicated. The research was conducted towards the end of a decade of conservative government at the national level, marked by large scale cuts to arts organisations and grant schemes and the absence of a national cultural policy. While individual states implemented their own support structures for the arts, the state where this mentoring program was undertaken was one of those that downgraded the arts portfolio and largely de-funded the sector, instead focusing on more easily scalable and entrepreneurial digital content industries. Against this larger backdrop, the offering by a peak organization of a funded mentorship (the focus of the research discussed in this paper) can be seen as an important attempt to support creative practitioners.

The mentoring program referred to in the paper is open to creative practitioners across all stages of career.[2] Each iteration begins with an open call for potential mentees, purposefully encouraging participation from culturally diverse and regional artists. Most applicants nominate their preferred mentor, although the organisation brokers the formal approach and process and may suggest nominees if required. The length of the mentorship and the form that contact may take is negotiated between mentor and mentee, to be completed within the annual funding window of twelve months. Funding is provided to fund both the mentee's and the mentor's time, normally at $AU5,000.[3]

The data analysed in the paper were collected in a research project running parallel to the program from 2018 to 2021. The project is a university study, conducted separately to the program's own internal evaluation and feedback tools; the separation was made clear to research participants. The paper presents findings from a close analysis of the first 18 interviews (in order of participation) with 6 mentors and 12 mentees. Interviewing took place between February 2020 and November 2021, approximately 6 months after completion of the mentorships. This was a period of growing awareness of COVID-19 but the mentorships took place in the pre-pandemic program.

Considered straightforwardly as reliable direct communications, the interviews would confirm many findings of previous research, such as the importance of mentors as gatekeepers, and therefore prospective gate-openers. Relatedly, the interviews indicate the success of this mentoring program for mentees, most of whom reported that they were highly satisfied with the mentoring experience. They described it positively and chose the most favourable options if the interviewer suggested a choice of responses. Mentees reported that the program assisted them to achieve specified objectives, like acquiring new skills, winning funding, and producing new work: *'so I can use that skill now I'm not scared of using that skill'.*[4] The interviews also include accounts of how a mentor provided practical assistance in the form of introductions and references, opening up opportunities to obtain exhibitions and funding: *'I really believe that it has been absolutely instrumental to getting me a solo show'.* In addition, mentees referred to the access that a high status mentor could provide to the networks and insider groups that Howard S. Becker (1982) labelled 'art worlds', a term also used by some participants; for example, *'so I'm entering the art world here in [city] and it takes a lot of getting into'*[5] and *'working with [my mentor] was an amazing opportunity because she is so highly regarded in an international contemporary arts scene'.*

Such positive claims about the mentoring program might be evidence not only of its efficacy but also other benefits. One of these might be relief from the noted difficulties of a creative life, appreciated as an opportunity to 'push back' briefly against the ongoing pressure of carrying sole responsibility for the success or failure of 'personalized, performative and self-directing modes of work' (Banks 2007, 43). Research with British art college students (Taylor and Littleton 2012) encountered experienced practitioners who had entered a funded course in a similar spirit, for the short-term access to studio space and a (small) income, without expectations about other outcomes.

To investigate affective practices around creativity, our methodological approach utilises analytic concepts from critical discursive psychology (Taylor 2015; Wetherell 1998). We assume that patterns in talk indicate speakers' take up of discursive or social resources, such as narrative and positions, in their sense-making.[6] The shared resources are part of a 'patchwork' (Wetherell 2012, 119) available to mentees' for understanding themselves and their potential trajectories, for instance as creative practitioners. The take up of resources in multiple instances of talk contributes to the reinforcement and 'entanglement' of meanings and feelings associated with 'doing' in a creative practice and a creative career. This is the process, functioning at both a social and individual level, through which affective practices 'wear what could be described as grooves or ruts in people's bodies and minds, just as walking particular routes over the grass year after year produces new paths' (Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018, 6).[7]

The dataset was analysed twice, as a single body of interviews, then as the two separate subsets of mentor and mentee interviews. The paper refers mainly to the interviews with mentees although the analysis is informed by the context provided by both sets of data. The datasets are inevitably too

large to be reproduced in full. We use short extracts from participants' talk to exemplify patterns from across our larger dataset of interview material which are then interpreted with reference to the concept of affective practice.Individual speakers are not named (pseudonymously) or described because those conventions potentially imply an individualist rather than a social analysis (Taylor 2012).

The analysis

We set out the findings of patterns in the mentees' talk around feelings and emotions, narratives of achievement and progress, and accounts of the relationship between mentor and mentee.

Feelings and emotions

One notable feature of the dataset is the many references to feelings and emotions, including the 'love of the work' already discussed by many other researchers (e.g. Duffy 2016; Gill 2007; Taylor and Littleton 2012). Mentees seldom described their own creative practice or mentoring experience in entirely instrumental terms. Their positive references might be read as direct communications of good experiences and expectations around being creative, variously given by a 'fascination' (Reckwitz 2017) that is supposedly lacking from 'ordinary' work, the assumption that creative work is 'personal in the sense of being unique to (the maker), shaped by who she is' (Taylor and Littleton 2012) and the promise of self-actualisation (Maslow 1962).

Another positive pattern, linked specifically to the mentoring experience refers to the feeling of confidence. This also constructed a narrative of causation, exemplified by a mentee who, when asked to summarise how he had benefited from the program, answered succinctly '*new-found confidence, design aesthetic, new ideas and technical skills*'. Another answered: '*It hasn't really advanced my practice as such no, but what it's done it's given me the confidence to use it in my practice*'. These examples indicate an assumption that the feeling of confidence, has powerful efficacy in and of itself, potentially contributing directly to creative success. Some researchers suggest that references to confidence in contemporary talk are shaped by contemporary neoliberal and entrepreneurial priorities (e.g. Gill 2014; Luckman 2015; Scharff 2018). According to this argument, the references are not reliable descriptions of individual experiences of feeling confident, but instead reflect a prevailing contemporary talk practice and form of self-making that discounts difficulties, promoting and optimising the self as part of the neoliberal prioritisation of individual responsibility. The positive emphasis can function as a denial of significant social issues, including structural constraints and inequalities (Gill 2014).

This critique is subtle: the suggestion is not that speakers intentionally mislead but that feelings (for instance, of confidence) are, variously, exploited (Lehto 2021; Loveday 2018), managed (Isin 2004), signalled (Jones 2002), or even produced in response to the governing strategies that also celebrate them (Scharff 2016). Similarly, a confidence success narrative, in this case in relation to creative success, has been noted and criticised as linked to a neoliberal ideology that foregrounds individual responsibility and self-management over structural problems and inequalities (Orgad and Gill 2022). We agree in part with the critique. We also approach the references as part of a contemporary talk practice but in the terms of affective practice. The narrative is an example of how a 'body possibility' (the feeling of confidence) has become entangled with meaning making (the causal connection) and other social relations. However, we would emphasise that the causal relation cannot be certain or predictive but is inevitably contingent. It may indeed be part of a potentially exploitative figuration or, depending on other circumstances, it may function more positively for creative practitioners, for example to sustain them through the kind of difficulties noted by Bilton et al. (2021).[8] Our interest is in considering the possibility rather than closing down the interpretation.

In addition to the positive references discussed, our dataset also contained negative references to feelings and the personal aspect of creative practices consistent with Bilton et al's account of the difficulties of the creative process. These appeared, for example, in expressions of self-doubt and anxiety about achievement. There were also repeated descriptions of the mentoring relationship as potentially exposing and therefore requiring trust: *'you're in a vulnerable position so you need to feel that you're able to trust the person, as well as speak to them quite honestly'* and *'you have to be comfortable with someone because you're exposing yourself'*. Any working relationship and career development potentially involves challenges that produce emotional responses, but it can be argued that an arts mentoring relationship, like the ones discussed in this paper, is particularly exposing, because the mentee is revealing not only her creative practice and outputs but also herself in her creative work.[9]

Achievement and progress

There were other recurring narratives of sequence and consequence. These patterns can be inter-preted as evidence of speakers taking up of established narratives that are part of the shared knowledge and culture around creative working (e.g. Gergen 1985; Taylor and Littleton 2012). One strong pattern of this kind related to the experience of being accepted onto the mentoring program. The acceptance was often constructed by mentees as an achievement marker, signalling both personal affirmation and affirmation as a practitioner: '*I think [there's] the idea that the people who gave you the mentorship have faith in you to do it'* and *'it makes people trust you it makes people believe if other people believe in you then it makes it easier for other funders or other places that you're applying to believe in you'*. Acceptance therefore became part of a progressive narrative in which quality leads to recognition which in turn leads to future success.[10] Similarly, if a nominated person had agreed to act as a mentor on the mentoring program, the acceptance could be constructed as confirmation of the quality of the mentee's own work: '*it's really just giving me that validation or the acknowledgement from a very prominent contemporary peer that I admire that my work is good'*.

In addition to the narratives constructed in the participants' talk, our analysis showed how both the overall organisation of the program and the questions asked in the research interviews could contribute to constructions of progression in the mentees' careers. For example, the application process for the program, unsurprisingly, encourages mentees to specify objectives, and in the research interviews (after the mentorship), mentees indicated that these objectives had mostly been achieved, at least to some extent. Also, during the research interviews, following a point raised in the formal program evaluation, mentees were asked to specify their career stage, first, at the time they participated in the mentoring program, and again, 'at the moment' of interview. The program offered the options 'Starting Up/Emerging', 'Becoming Established/Mid-Career', and 'Established''. Taken together, the questions could be seen to function as a tacit (and unintended) invitation to a mentee to present a personal advance along the career path as a consequence of participating in the program. Although not all the mentees claimed that a change had occurred (for example, one answered: '*still midcareer*'), the effect of the questions was to construct a progressive career path, despite the often-noted absence of 'age-stage' careers in the creative sector. Some mentees then linked the progression to formal study: '*I don't think I'm an established artist yet I'm still emerging because I did my undergrad honours and PhD all straight in a row*'. In contrast, one mentee explicitly challenged the link to study, presenting herself as established even though she had not had formal training in her practice. The categories were also taken up in later responses: "*for myself being an emerging artist . . .*". The analysis therefore indicated that career progression was constructed not only within the mentees' own accounts but also through larger organisational practices that became incorporated within the research interviews. The questions reinforced the construction of a progressive career narrative to which the program was itself contributing.

This suggests that the overall organisation of the mentoring programme subtly constructs achievement and a trajectory of progression through predictable stages towards success, reinforcing

social and material figurations of the kind referred to by Wetherell (2012). Even if the creative sector is accepted to be characterised by a preponderance of precarious and individualised working arrangements, the construction of progression in and of itself provides (possibly intentional) support for mentees, including encouragement for practitioners struggling with difficult employment circumstances. A more critical interpretation might be that the construction reinforces a creative imaginary that contributes to the kinds of (self-)exploitation (McRobbie 2002; Ross 2003) that has prevailed in the sector since long before the pandemic (O'Connor 2021). In these terms, the progression might be considered another example of a 'false promise' attached to a creative practice and career (Taylor 2015, 184), operating alongside other exaggeratedly positive representations. Nevertheless, the application process for the mentorship, the general organisation of the program, the post-mentoring evaluation process and even the research interviews can all be understood as aspects of how creative mentoring functions as an affective practice, bringing together ('entangling') feeling experiences around a position as a creative practitioner.

The mentoring relationship

A further indication of how mentoring can contribute to the entanglement of 'meaning' and 'turbulence' or feeling appears in the mentees' constructions of the mentoring relationship. There were two strong patterns in the construction of the relationship and the positioning of mentor and mentee. In one construction, the mentor enters the mentee's world, contributing to the practice as adviser and even co-creator. In the other construction, the positions are reversed; the mentee is admitted to the mentor's world of practice, positioned as a privileged observer who may even join in some of the activities. The two constructions did not correspond to separate groups of speakers. As our approach would predict (cf. Gergen 1985; Wetherell 1998), the same mentee might take up both at different points in their account and interpretation of the mentoring relationship. Our interest is in the affective position of the mentee within each construction, the relation between mentee and mentor, and the possibility of forward movement or 'action' in the mentee's creative practice and career.

In the first construction, the mentoring relationship is constructed as the mentor entering the mentee's previously individual creative practice. This was vividly described by one mentee in terms of children's play: *'if you can find someone in your mentorship who you kind of want to invite into your sandpit, really come and play with you know'*. This construction might be described as 'me-centred' because it positions the mentee as the focus of the relationship, in contrast to a conventional teaching or training relationship which communicates the work and/or knowledge of (established) others. In the me-centred relationship, the mentor is potentially positioned as provider of emotional support, breaking the solitude associated with a creative practice. The figure of the lone artist is something of a cliché but not necessarily false, as one mentee noted: '*it's a very lonely, lonely world being an artist'*. An additional meaning or promise is that this mentee-centred relationship carries the possibility of future collaborative working. Indeed, sociocultural psychologists who challenge the individualism of the image of the lone artist (e.g. Sawyer 2003) would see such collaboration within the mentoring relationship as an instance of the creative collaboration that underlies all creative practice. The mentees' accounts of collaborative working with the mentor are highly positive, although the admission of the mentor into the mentee's personal practice potentially risks '*exposing'* the mentee, explaining the emphasis some mentees placed on '*trust'* as a requirement of the mentoring relationship, as already noted.

This construction of the mentoring relationship carries the potential for benefits for the mentor, as some mentors acknowledged.[11] A number of mentees, and some mentors, described the mentoring relationship as eventually turning into a collaboration of equals: '*the level of engagement we both felt and shared and wanted to pursue took us beyond the immediate parameters of the mentorship as programmed'*. This possibility perhaps underlay mentees' appreciation of a relationship with the mentor that continued beyond the end of the program, as an extended

source of support or just a friendship: '*We're continually in touch*'; and '*she's very much followed through with that mentorship even though it's finished I feel there's an ongoing support and connection and commitment there from he*r'. Indeed, when mentees expressed dissatisfaction with the program, this was often because the relationship had not continued or, in a few cases, because the mentor had not been as available as anticipated during the official period of the program.

The second construction that appeared in the mentees' accounts reversed the direction of the me-centred relationship. Instead, the focus was on the mentor with the mentee immersed in close observation, in many cases in the mentor's workspace, echoing a model more reminiscent of trades, traditional crafts or studio-based apprenticeships. This construction may have been reinforced by the organisation of the program. The requirement for each mentee to choose a mentor perhaps promoted a mentor-centred focus and relationship. An additional consideration was the site of the creative practice. In some creative fields, such as performance-linked practices, the mentee followed the mentor to the various locations of already scheduled events. In others, the mentorship required access to a dedicated, appropriately equipped creative workspace which was more likely to be available to the mentor than the mentee.

A mentor-centred focus is consistent with the assumption in previous research that the mentor-ship provides practical or instrumental benefits. Although mentoring is supposedly different to teaching, for some mentees, observation of the mentor was valued as an opportunity to learn a complex making skill and practice:

> there was a lot of going back and forth between watching listening I've made notes and then I would do it and then whilst I was doing it if there was something that needed adjusting he would tweak it and sometimes he'd even touch my hand and say your hand needs to be here can you feel the difference so that was really important.

Through observation of the mentor, the mentee might also aim to acquire the working perspective associated with the mentor's creative practice. A mentor-centred focus is consistent with Naudin's (2018) finding that observation of the mentor could offer the mentee an example of success in an aspired-to field or art world. Some accounts suggested that the observation included an attempt to capture some essence of the mentor as an artist or practitioner, with even a suggestion of hero-worship: '*he touches me deeper than my work touches anyone so I just wanted a little bit of his inside head to try to work that out*'. However, it was noticeable that while the mentee described this mentor-centred form of relationship in highly positive terms, the mentor could be more ambivalent, expressing uncertainty about its value: '*I think he got something out of it but I don't know to what extent that helped his professional development*.'

Discussion

By going beyond a simple reading of talk data as direct communication or reportage, our analysis offers a new understanding of the workings of arts mentoring and its potential contributions to artists and creative practitioners in the contemporary contexts of the global cultural and creative sector. Our research supports previous findings that a mentoring program provides practical support for the artistic or creative practice of mentees. Our additional claim is that for creative and artistic practitioners mentoring is a site in which which the mentee's own practice or 'doing' can become coloured by additional and generally positive associations, including the promise of extra-rational rewards.

A more precise interpretation of this colouring is offered by recent accounts from critical discursive psychologists (e.g. Calder-Dawe et al. 2021; Martinussen and Wetherell 2021; Wetherell 2012). These challenge a conventional psychological understanding of (embodied) experiences of emotion and feeling as discrete and able to be abstracted from the contexts in which they occur. Instead, the concept of affective practice proposes that doing and feeling are always connected and contextualised, looping through the simultaneously social and individual practices through which meanings are established, reinforced, taken up or

resisted and modified. Similar social theories of meaning are well-established although they become strained by the term 'meaning' itself, since that is so commonly reduced to some informational or verbal category, omitting the colour and affective loading of emotion and feeling that will always be present, including positive and negative valuing.

As with any other professional category, for artists and creative practitioners there will be meanings that derive from social and cultural contexts, including art worlds, with their own complex histories. To summarise the point somewhat crudely, the possibilities for performance, self-presentation and acceptance as, say, a painter or musician will be given in large part by established understandings and histories of painting and music, as well as more recent relevant developments in either field. In addition, for any individual practitioner such social and cultural resources will themselves carry further meanings and feelings that derive from personal histories and experience, for instance, from education and family contexts (Taylor 2015).

Interpreted in terms of affective practice, a mentee's doing or performance as an artist or creative practitioner accrues additional associations in the context of an arts mentoring program. In addition to the satisfaction of potentially successfully acquiring new skills or technical knowledge, or of exhibiting in a space to which could not previously be accessed, the mentee can experience the affirmation of being chosen, by both the program and the mentor, and the encouragement of being positioned on a progressive career trajectory, however uncertain. There is the promise or at least the possibility of entry into a wider creative or art world that can confer wider recognition. There is also the affirmation of the mentee's own artistic or creative practice, carrying personal associations and the promise of self-actualisation.

Within the program, the mentoring relationship is a site in which additional feeling-laden aspects and activities converge over the mentoring period. The relationship with the mentor offers possibilities of different experiences of successful collaboration and access into someone else's successful practice. It may also accrue additional associations from different kinds of relationships, including the kind of admiration given by a 'fan club' to a celebrity. Mentoring can therefore itself be understood as an affective practice in which the interactions between mentor and mentee contribute to the taking up and reinforcing of connected activities and feelings that are socially meaningful as artistic and creative. The synthesis or 'entanglement' of creative and artistic affect and practice is confirmed in a process somewhat akin to an elaboration of the conventional notion of socialisation. Moreover, the process is ongoing, not static. Meanings and feelings converge and are modified in new configurations. Considered in this way, the arts mentoring program we have discussed can be seen to contribute to change in creative fields.

Of course the mentoring process and its outcomes may not all be positive. The reinforcing and normalising also relate to the kinds of difficulties in the creative process that Bilton et al draw attention to, and to the promotion of potentially negative survival strategies to negotiate these structural as well as personal challenges (such as the performance of self-confidence as a remedy for difficulties). The creative process itself is complex and involves ambiguity and negative experiences, and the mentoring program will include these. Sometimes, also, affirmation of the mentee's practice may be withheld by a mentor as tacit or even explicit criticism. The hoped for skills may not be acquired. The mentoring relationship may be interrupted or cut short. However, if the possibilities are fulfilled, the outcome for the mentee from this extended program will be a new or reinforced entanglement of creative performance and experience. For all of these reasons, although an arts mentoring program can be seen to provide practical and instrumental assistance, it must also be considered in different terms, as profoundly involving the emotions and feelings of mentees. On a wider scale, the program can be seen as a more formalised augmentation of the processes by which art worlds expand, recognising and accepting new practitioners and creative practices into the social relations implicated with art.

Conclusion

This paper has presented findings from recent research on an Australian arts mentoring program. It has shown that the contributions of such a program extend beyond those identified in a general or conventional model of mentoring in which a mentor provides practical guidance and 'gate opening' access to a relatively career-early mentee. The paper has proposed that mentoring is also a site in which the cultural and personal feeling-laden associations of a creative or artistic practice can be reinforced, affirming a mentee's identity and status as a practitioner and strengthening a complex creative practice. In additionally challenging post-pandemic contexts, mentoring can potentially support mentees in a career that must always contend with the continuing precariousness of work in the creative sector.

Notes

1. Although our analysis builds on Taylor (2015), her term 'psychosocial' is avoided because of frequent use to refer to psychoanalytic theorising.
2. 29 mentees were interviewed. Ages ranged from 25–29 to 70–79, with the largest cohort 40–44. Slightly more mentees identified as female than male. One identified as non-binary. Most participants were Australians of various European backgrounds. Three identified as Aboriginal Australians. Four identified as a person with a disability.
3. As an indication of scale, this is equivalent to about 6 weeks Australian minimum wage.
4. Extracts from participants' talk are italicised throughout the paper, to distinguish them from other quotations (i.e. from academic sources).
5. Unless otherwise stated, multiple extracts are from different participants.
6. Discursive positions are, of course, relational and unequal. The mentoring programme we study inevitably encompasses differences that operate between individuals and across wider contexts, for instance, in status, earning potential and access to resources, such as public funding.
7. Research on 'affective practice' has adopted varied methodological approaches. Our approach might be described as 'light' in contrast to those within an ethnomethodological tradition that study situated talk within a single interaction, selecting and closely analysing a stretch of transcript in order to tease out the specificities of an affective practice (e.g. Martinussen and Wetherell 2021). Our presentation of limited data extracts is similar to studies by (Lehto 2021) and (Wetherell, McConville, and McCreanor 2020), both of which are in a more ethnographic decision.
8. Two other points can be made. First, in the negotiations creative workers need to make to sustain their work, the implication of representations overriding realities carries an uncomfortable echo of the Marxist concept of false consciousness (Luckman 2015, 130), denying the mentees and other workers access to insights regarding their own experience. Second, the difficulties of a creative career are now so well known that creative practitioners will be under no illusions about the challenges they face and would not need to misrepresent any negative experience, which would suggest both their negative and positive accounts can be considered equally reliable.
9. At some points throughout the paper, the pronouns 'she' and 'her' are adopted to avoid possible singular/plural ambiguities of 'they', 'their' and 'them'.
10. Similarly Taylor and Littleton (2012) found that some students and alumni claimed that one of the greatest benefits of art school was the initial acceptance and being able subsequently to name a prestigious school on a CV.
11. A further benefit for the mentors, beyond the scope of this discussion but acknowledged in some interviews, was the opportunity to look at their own practice in a new light.

Disclosure statement

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