

# Reflecting Processes in Research: Relational Learning in a Peer Mentoring Project

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## Description and Background

*Reflecting processes* is a qualitative research approach grounded in a social constructionist view of the world, which focuses on the ways in which knowledge and understanding are constructed by the interactions that an individual has. In this approach, the individual functions as a representation of many other individuals and experiences: who one is, is created by the interactions one has and the meaning one makes from those experiences.

This perspective, when applied to a qualitative research setting, allows the research to take on new forms. Research that places value on a process of hearing different opinions, such as *reflecting processes*, allows individuals to puzzle over the issues related to the topic and generate differing opinions and perspectives about that topic. It is a way to include the broader culture in knowledge and, by incorporating different perspectives and ideas, make what is learned more relevant to a larger population. Using this type of process allows new possibilities to unfold or, as authors such as Tom Andersen and Ken Gergen would say, allows the conversation to continue.

*Reflecting processes* (see Andersen, 1991) were originally born from a desire to approach counseling relationships from a more democratic approach. While the initial application of *reflecting processes* was to therapeutic practices, educational research can also benefit from these principles. In *reflecting processes*, participants are encouraged to think deeply about topics, considering ways of thinking about them that they may never have before. In this process each participant takes on the role of a co-participant in the conversation, accentuating the egalitarian nature of qualitative research.

## Purposes

- Introduce students to the *reflecting process*
- Document the experiences of the mentors and mentees and make them visible

This process is well-suited to qualitative research because it allows the researcher to step back and truly think about the issues at hand, and in what ways these utterances can be perceived.

## Selected Literature

- Andersen, T. (1991). *The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues About the Dialogues*. New York; W. W. Norton & Company.
- Andersen, T. (1995). Reflecting processes; Acts of informing and forming. In S. Friedman (Ed.), *The Reflecting Team in Action* (p. 11-37). New York; Guilford Press.
- Gergen, K. (2009). *Relational Being*. New York; Oxford University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. & Gergen, M. (2004). *Social Construction: Entering the Dialogue*. Chagrin Falls, OH; Taos Institute Publications.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rubin, H. and Rubin, I. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

## Reflecting Questions

- 1) What is it to be a mentor?
- 2) What is the Peer Mentoring Project and how has it changed over time?
- 3) What is it to be a mentor or mentee?
- 4) What is the Peer Mentoring Project?

## Design and Methodology

*Reflecting processes* were used in four sessions. For the purposes of this study, reflecting teams were created which consisted of combinations of mentors, mentees, faculty, and the researchers.

Each reflecting team consisted of between four and seven participants. Some participants engaged in all four *reflecting processes*, while others were only present for one or two. The class at large acted as the listening layer, who then had the opportunity to discuss what they had heard the initial group say and consider the experiences they had discussed. The researchers guided the conversation with questions and, as appropriate, responses to what was being heard. The researchers were careful to act as facilitators for this dialogue and as a vehicle for the reflecting team to explore thoughts.

The transcripts were read by multiple readers who contributed to the organization of emerging themes. This also enhanced the reliability and validity of the study, through triangulation of the data.

