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ABSTRACT

Although mentoring is a popular practice in academia, mentor-protegee relationships are, for women faculty, problematic in several areas including power dynamics and cross-gender interactions. This paper discusses mentoring among academic faculty in the context of a feminist analysis of mentor-protegee relations, and suggests a feminist mentoring approach. Untenured female faculty often encounter marginalization, and affiliation with feminism may increase that marginalization. The paper discusses marginalization and looks at mentoring from four perspectives: 1) myths about mentoring, 2) liminality, 3) transforming sexist culture, and 4) mentoring with female values. In typical mentoring programs, inherent inequalities lead to imbalanced mentor-protegee relationships. Many mentors do not have adequate training in cross-gender mentoring. Feminist mentors should help to identify sex bias as problematic. Mentors of both sexes should participate in understanding, working within, and transforming sexist culture. Feminist mentoring emphasizes interpersonal relationships, empowerment and personal development, self-esteem, promotion of enhanced knowledge, skills and political awareness, personal autonomy, and politics of gender. (HB)

Thinking Thrice:
A Feminist Response to "Mentoring" that Marginalizes

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The fact that I am a heterosexual, white and middle-class does not exempt me from marginalization in the academy, in fact, I consider myself to be thrice marginalized once as a woman, once as a feminist, and once as an untenured faculty member. The purpose of this paper is to discuss *mentoring*, a much touted institutionalized practice as critical to women's rise in the academic hierarchy. However, mentoring-protégé relationships in higher education are inherently problematic because often the tenured mentors are often male and the untenured protégés are female. From a feminist perspective, male mentors' values and morals are normalized since he may: 1) presume his experiences in the academy are both universal and stable; 2) understand his experiences in the academy to be "real" and therefore, a reliable means of knowing; and 3) not recognize his experiences in the academy as a product of ideology and politics.

Not only are women currently a minority in the upper echelons of full tenured American higher education faculty; it seems that a precious few are being groomed to achieve that rank. Progress can be made though an examination of cross-gender mentoring practices of marginalized women struggling for equality in the patriarchically dominated institutions we call schools. In this paper, I begin with a discussion of marginalization and then address the following mentoring issues from a feminist perspective that should be considered in order to facilitate this rise: 1) myths about mentoring; 2) liminality; 3) transforming our sexist culture; and 4) mentoring with feminist values. I conclude with some suggestions for feminist scholars, who want a say

in mentoring practices in order to break new ground and increase understanding of feminist mentoring.

Marginalization

Frable (1993) defines marginalization, in a group or society, as a subjective sense of not belonging, including feelings of uniqueness, isolation, and alienation from the mainstream, as well as an objective reality in which nonmarginalized members excluded, ignored, stereotyped, and not understood. Although my academic job is by U.S. standards (and certainly by world standards) very well paying, as a woman who is also an untenured faculty member, I feel the insecurity of budget cuts; teaching and advising loads going up; limited administrative assistant support; limited opportunities for interesting creative, or innovative scholarly work; increased pressure to publish and present research; lessened travel funds; strictly monitored use of the copy machine; and having to supply my own paper, pencils, pens, folders. My point is that although as an untenured faculty member I am still very well set in this world, there are still some issues that cause me to reach my "shit limit," if I may borrow from Marilyn Frye (1992a) whose work about women in higher education explores the obstacles that women encounter on a daily basis.

According to Frable (1993) the extent of one's visibility in an identity group shapes one's marginalization. Therefore, people often conceal devalued group memberships in order to minimize their marginalization. I choose to claim membership with feminism, which is a devalued group within my college, and therefore increases my marginalization. As an identified feminist, I am constantly aware of the implications of

attempting to act as a feminist teacher within the patriarchal confines of a conservative institution. For example, traditional gendered roles often make women think twice before responding to their "shit limit" and acting in a way that could earn them the *bitch* label.

Frye (1992a) argues that we must decide how *manly* to act in order to be taken seriously and at the same time know how, when, where and with whom to fight over sexist language, sexist jokes, sexist gallantry, sexist assumptions, and sexist dress requirements. For example, when a female administrative assistant continually refers to me as "Susan" and to my female tenure track colleagues by their first names, but, in the same breath, refers to each of my male colleagues using the honorific "Doctor," I feel on the brink of reaching my "shit limit" and have to refrain from acting in a way that will earn me the *bitch* label. In this situation, my options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose me to penalty, censure, or deprivation. For example, I can smile and be cheerful, but this compliance signals docility and acquiescence in my situation. As a result, I have participated in my own oppression. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance would expose me to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous. At the very least I would be perceived as difficult or unpleasant to work with.

Situations such as this exist in complex tension and are indicative of the power inequities inherent in the academy. They are also representative of a moral dilemma. Faced with everyday situations a feminist continually makes choices. If her response is to use strong language, she invites the *bitch* label; if she does not, she "invites categorization as a 'lady'—one too delicately constituted to cope with robust speech or the realities to which it presumably refers" (Frye, 1992b, p. 39). Basically, a feminist

must balance how to survive (and keep her job) within a hostile sexist society while living in accord with her feminist values. Thus, Frye (1992a) writes:

> If a woman fails to take matters of integrity and compromise seriously, or makes the wrong decisions, she is likely to slip into being one of the boys—a female man. If she takes them seriously and makes the right decisions, she invites the fate of being a *token feminist*, and the whole situation becomes more complicated (p. 31).

Feminist mentors may be either male or female however, they should seek to enable women proteges to find a balance in the academy. Biklen (1980) points out the difficulties of women attempting to succeed in traditionally male fields: Either they are judged competent and unfeminine or incompetent and feminine, a choice that puts two strong and interconnected identities in conflict.

Feminist mentors should also help proteges to identify sex-role stereotyping and socialization as problematic. Socialization and sex-role stereotyping have been cited by several researchers (Davis, 1978; Poll, 1978; Shakeshaft, 1989) as explanations of why women themselves, as well as others in society, do not immediately connect women with administration or full tenured status. Teaching has become a feminized profession and viewed as compatible with traditional female sex-roles. Being a teacher does not challenge a woman's femininity. Full tenure at a university, however, does put the role of female and the role of worker at odds. In the case of the administrative assistants referring to the untenured female professors by their first names, both men and women have been socialized to believe that that is acceptable.

Shakeschaft (1989) argues that in an androcentric worldview, traditional female qualities are not highly valued.

> By dividing the world into two kinds of behavior—those who are male and those who are female—and labeling behaviors of competence as male, women must choose between being called competent or being identified as female (p. 113).

Myths about Mentoring

Mentoring programs at the university level often require a newly hired untenured professor to seek out a tenured faculty member as her mentor. The assumption is that tenured folks have more time to dedicate to the neophyte's acculturation into the professorate. Moreover, they have the requisite "experience" to guide and nurture the novice. However, the "politics of experience" approach to mentoring—based on the mentor's authority of experience—can have de-politicizing effects on the protégé. The ideology and effects of the politics of experience are therefore, particularly important to confront within institutional school settings, where identities can often seem more rigid, politics more personal, and past histories more intense.

Leaders in educational organizations cannot assume that because one is a tenured faculty member one is prepared to mentor an untenured faculty member without specialized training in both cross-cultural and cross-gender mentoring (Murrell, Crosby, and Ely, 1999). The mentoring relationship requires trust on the part of the protégé, much more than on the part of the mentor. In other words, the relationship is inherently unequal and non-reciprocal.

Another myth about the mentoring relationship is that one can be *assigned* a mentor or a protégé? Assigning a protégé to a mentor is an ill-conceived notion and needs to be more carefully considered before it is put forth as "policy." Choosing a mentor can be a difficult task for newly hired female professors who look around and find few, if any, tenured females in their departments. Moreover, being new to the organization untenured female faculty are most likely not personally acquainted with the tenured members of the faculty and so the pressure to "choose a mentor" before she has had an opportunity to get to know several individuals on a more personal level is oxymoronic to the concept of mentoring. Yet, it seems to me that "just getting it on paper" is often the primary focus of these university policies rather than enabling mentors and protégés to work together effectively across gender lines (Murrell, et al., 1999).

Reich (1995) suggests that as more and more women mentors assist other women protégés, they "will begin to form their own 'old girl' networks that will continue to gather momentum" (p. 143). I would argue that having women in the higher echelons of management is not necessarily synergistic nor is duplicating historical patriarchal 'old boy' power relations in line with feminist theory and is also mythological.

Liminality

Although the institution of schooling both at the K-12 level and at the university level is male-dominated and directed to serve the ends of male-dominated society, economy, and culture, that equality must come out of particular and concrete circumstances. As an untenured professor, I feel as if I am in a state of *betwixt-between*. That is to say, not yet tenured but often expected to "perform" as if I am. Theoretically,

my mentor should help guide me through this transitional and temporal space to a more stable and established space.

The term "liminality" literally means, "being on the threshold." The anthropologist, Victor Turner (1969) developed a concept of liminality based on Van Gennep's analysis of "rights of passage," specialized events of change. Van Gennep identified three stages of such rights: separation, transition, and re-incorporation. The transition phase or the *liminal phase* is characterized by the programmed deconstruction of routine social structural perceptions and arrangements. Turner (1969) argues that within culture there is dynamism of structure and anti-structure, calling the events of anti-structure 'the liminal' and its transitional experience *communitas*.

Turner's conception of *communitas* provides the opportunity for revitalizing mentoring practices. For example, *communitas* allows for a recognition of the sentiment of human kindness and it represents the expression of those marginalized. *Communitas* is concrete and spontaneous; it represents an altered way of being with one another, which Turner finds best expressed by Buber's notion of the I-Thou relationship (1969).

Mentors, through opening up a participatory space, can enable their protégés to re-connect communally with basic meanings and understandings of existence within the academy. In a study of the corporate world, Reich (1995) found that from the perspective of the protégé, mentors who give concrete and spontaneous aid such as assignment to special projects, creation of new positions, and assistance on difficult tasks, increased their probability of promotion. Political aid, such as career guidance and counseling on company politics was also considered important by female protégés (1995). *Communitas* is a way of enabling protégés to gain social recognition and

understanding within the institution, while moving them through participation out of liminality to a place where they can act representatively.

Mentoring to Transform our Sexist Culture

Gender issues have less to do with the essential characteristics of women and men than with stereotypes and the distribution of power and status within organizations. During the course of my career in the public schools and now in the academy, men, who were supposed to be mentoring my progress, abused their positions of power at the expense of my professional growth. Separatist feminists posit that women and men are "equal but different" and that equality comes in raising the importance of the private (reproductive, domestic) sphere to the level of the public (productive, cultured) sphere. Although research does not support the notion that women's work suffers from the added responsibilities of the private sphere, it is believed by men in positions of power that family responsibilities adversely affect job performance (Shakeshaft, 1989). For instance, an AASA (Educational Research Service, 1981) survey of superintendents and school board presidents reports that a majority of male superintendents and school board presidents (56% and 59%) stated that pregnancy and an administrative career don't mix. Moreover, most of the males in the study supported the notion that "a woman who stays at home all the time with her children is a better mother than a woman who works outside the home at least half time (as cited in Shakeshaft, 1989, p. 113). Thus, home and family responsibilities provide obstacles for women in higher education and in administration in two ways: The woman not only must effectively juggle all of her tasks, she must also

contend with males who erroneously believe that not only is she unable to manage the balancing act but that it is inappropriate for her to even attempt it (1989).

Separatist feminists, such as Frye (1992a) focus on connections and relationships and the celebration of difference among women that are necessary to create a new order and promote the value of feminist collectivity in the form of solidarity however she also suggests that there is a place within the system for autonomy. Frye (1992a) also argues that we can begin to use our positions within anti-woman establishments, such as schools and the academy, to simultaneously cultivate skills, attitudes, identity, and an alternative community within these establishments. In this sense, the common struggle against patriarchal discriminations and inequalities is now thought of as both a common struggle against patriarchal inequalities perpetuated by men against women and also as an *uncommon* struggle against matriarchal inequalities perpetuated by women against women.

Feminist collectivity assumes that women in tenured positions are eager to mentor their new colleagues, who might be seem as more capable and therefore threatening to them, especially if they have reached their tenured status by accommodation rather than confrontation. Therefore, mentors of both sexes must enable their protégés of both sexes to understand, work within, and transform our sexist culture. This idea can be implemented by understanding the power relations operating everywhere and valuing the experiences and differences of each and every woman and man.

Mentoring with Feminist Values

O'Neill, Horton, and Crosby (1999) observe that in cross-gender mentoring relationships both parties may assume stereotypical behaviors. Men are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, average, and also ideal. In the case of a male mentor and female protégé, the male mentor may act as a protector and helper, characterizing him as authoritative and controlling (Kram, 1985), whereas the female protégé may come to rely excessively on him for guidance and advice, thus implying that she cannot act autonomously. In this view, the mentoring relationship may elicit stereotypical behaviors that imply a more powerful and knowing male and a more obedient and compliant female, reinforcing the power dynamics that are inherent in the hierarchical relationship (Kram, 1985).

Taylor (1983) contrasts feminist values with masculinist values as "egalitarianism rather than hierarchy, cooperation rather than competition, nurturance rather than rugged individualism, peace rather than conflict" (p. 445). Internally public schools and institutions of higher education are bureaucratically structured. Mentoring with feminist values focuses on the primacy of interpersonal relationships; empowerment and personal development of members; building of self-esteem; the promotion of enhanced knowledge, skills and political awareness; personal autonomy; and the politics of gender within these patriarchal bureaucracies. Feminist values also serve to enable mentors to conceptualize service as a social relationship rather than a technological transfer of expertise, and the sharing of technology and information through a self-help rather than expert-naïve recipient format.

Conclusion

What is needed are mentoring programs that adequately address the acculturation needs of marginalized groups of women at the university level. Facilitating the transition from assistant professor to tenured professor requires the support of formalized programs in learning all the nuances of mentoring, including cross-cultural perspectives for mentoring people of color and cross-gender perspectives for mentoring across gender lines.

Mentoring programs should provide orientation to topics such as negotiating the world of publishing, beginning teacher concerns, and balancing service commitments. Programs at the university level should also provide mentors with the opportunities to critique his or her beliefs in relationship to those that may be different to or in conflict with their beliefs. This is of ultimate importance with cultivating cross-cultural and cross-gender mentoring relationships.

Mentoring across culturally diverse backgrounds and gender lines requires the transfer of academic skills, attitudes and behaviors, as well as the development of high levels of interaction, trust and communication. In this case, the mentor's ability to understand the protégé's culture and norms can facilitate this process. Olson and Ashton-Jones (1992) and Nichols, Carter, and Golden (1985) have warned us that the hierarchical nature of developmental relationships may simply reinforce the patriarchy of the larger society. Some organizations are instituting mentoring circles or groups in which several senior people share responsibility for several junior people (Catalyst, 1993; McCambley, 1999). Shakeshaft (1989) holds that a mentor is much more important to the individual woman protégé than is a role model because it is the mentor who advises the woman,

supports her for jobs, and promotes and helps her. Mentors, who have traditionally been white males in the academy have tended to promote other white males (1989). Women of color often suffer doubly in the area of mentoring—first because they are female and second because they are of color (Blake, 1999; Thomas, 1999). Mentoring appears to be successful in helping women acquire tenure and administrative titles (Murrell et al, 1999; Poll, 1978; Shakeshaft, 1989). Related to mentoring is the need to have access to a network that provides one with information on job openings and administrative strategies as well as visibility and a support group. Crosby (1999) argues that organizations should seek to develop formal sponsorship programs with less emotional content than mentoring programs, however, removing the emotional aspect is antithetical to feminist theory. Therefore, what is needed is a deeper understanding of feminist values and goals within mentoring programs to enable individuals to realize the importance of nurturing, bonding, caring, choices, and to gain the survival skills necessary for stability within patriarchal institutions.

In this article, I have argued for more just, fair equitable and sensible ways of enabling mentors to work with marginalized women in academe. The critical study of cross-gendered mentoring presents an exciting challenge for scholars of feminist theory. If feminist scholars want a say in what has been institutionalized as mentoring, they must claim the topic for themselves. Those who accept this challenge can break new ground and increase understanding of feminism, mentoring, and marganilization.

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