

Being Mentored: The Experience of Women Faculty

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Mentoring has been proposed as a means to enhance the career success of women faculty in the academic environment. This phenomenological study was undertaken to understand and describe the essential nature and meaning of the experience of being mentored for women faculty. In-depth conversational interviews were conducted with nine women faculty who stated that they had been mentored while in a faculty role. Their mentoring relationships were formal and informal, with male and female mentors of varying ranks, and both internal and external to the protégés' institutions. Through an analysis of the interview text, five essential themes of the experience of being mentored for women faculty emerged. These essential themes are (a) having someone who truly cares and acts in one's best interest, (b) a feeling of connection, (c) being affirmed of one's worth, (d) not being alone, and (e) politics are part of one's experience.

KEY WORDS: mentoring; women faculty; career development; phenomenology.

Introduction and Background

"I did not seek a mentor and I should have done it."—*woman faculty* (as cited in Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988, p. 52)

There has been a proliferation of literature, both research-based and popular, on the concept of mentoring in business and educational settings. In higher education, mentoring has been suggested as a vehicle

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to improve the socialization, orientation, and career outcomes of faculty as well as to promote increased equity for women faculty (Boice, 1993; Brennan, 2000; Robertson & Bean, 1997; Roland & Fontanesi-Seime, 1996; Smith, Smith, & Markham, 2000). In business and industry, mentoring is proposed as an avenue to support career success (Aryee, Wyatt, & Stone, 1996; Chao, 1997; Hite & McDonald, 2001; Scandura, 1992; Wallace, 2001), to help women and minorities gain access to informational networks (Blake-Beard, 1999; Dreher & Dougherty, 1997; Noe, 1988; Scandura & Ragins, 1993), and to enhance organizational performance and commitment (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000; Eby, 1997; Russell & Adams, 1997; Zey, 1984). Although a number of authors express concern over the potential negatives of these relationships, such as protégé dependency and inattentiveness, lack of mentor competence, and inconsistent actions of the mentor (Anderson & Ramsey, 1990; Braun, 1990; Ballantyne, Hansford, & Packer, 1995), positive outcomes are frequently perceived as likely to accrue as a result of a mentoring relationship.

However, a review of the literature on mentoring finds that there is neither a consistent definition of mentoring nor a common description of mentoring roles. Although the classical view of mentoring as proposed by Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McBee (1978) is often viewed as foundational, definitions of mentoring were found to vary across both structural and personal dimensions. In the literature, mentoring encompassed roles that were predominantly oriented toward providing advice and sponsorship, roles that were intense and developmental, and roles that fell somewhere in between (Merriam, 1983; Stalker, 1994). Some descriptions implied an intense one-on-one relationship with a senior person providing advice or counsel to a junior person (Anderson & Ramey, 1990; Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Noe, 1988; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1988; Russell & Adams, 1997), while others focused on progress-oriented functions and were considered to be less developmental and exclusive (Nies & Wolverson, 2000; Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1992; Zey, 1984). Other authors added an element of reciprocity or partnership to the definition of a mentoring relationship (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Stalker, 1994).

This definitional conundrum complicates our ability to gain an understanding of key dimensions of mentoring, as research findings on these dimensions are affected by how mentoring is defined. For example, in their study of mentoring of women administrators in cooperative education, Lee and Nolan (1998) developed a list of operational descriptors, based on a review of the literature on mentoring, that

were intended to identify true mentoring relationships. For the purpose of their study, 'true' mentors had superior status, were able to share resources, provided emotional support, and helped proteges develop their self-concept. Using the operational definition derived from the literature, these authors found that nearly half of the respondents did not identify having a mentor. However, one might question whether any of the remaining respondents might also have perceived that they had been mentored, given the opportunity to propose a differing description. Merriam, Thomas, and Zeph (1987) reported that definitional problems exist in education with respect to determining the actual prevalence of mentoring, with studies using a classical definition tending to find fewer instances of mentoring than those that define it as a more secondary, sponsorship role. In business and industry, definitional issues also result from the enhanced likelihood that the mentor also serves as the manager of the protégé (Kram, 1985; Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994; Tepper, 1995; Thibodeaux & Lowe, 1996), thus posing the additional challenge of researching a relationship that is comprised of both roles.

In an attempt to clarify this construct, there have been a number of authors who have described various roles and functions of mentoring. One of the most frequently cited is Kram (1983, 1985), who proposed a conceptual model of mentoring that identified career and psychosocial development as primary functions of the mentoring relationship, based on intensive biographical interviews of 18 pairs of managers in a business and industry context. Specific to the academic environment, Anderson and Ramey (1990) identified five role functions; that of educator, sponsor, coach, counselor and confronter. In their study of 347 faculty members, Sands, Parson, and Duane (1991) defined four types of mentor roles: the friend, the career guide, the information source, and the intellectual guide. However, regardless of the associated definition or ascribed roles, the question remains as to what are the essential characteristics of mentoring across the various types of mentoring relationships that women perceive they experience in the academic environment. The purpose of this study was to explore this question for women faculty through the use of phenomenological research methodology.

Phenomenological Research Methodology

My interest was in gaining a deep understanding of the essential nature and meaning of the mentoring experience for women faculty,

in order to gain insight into what this experience is like for women faculty. This line of inquiry led me to my research question, which was as follows: "What is the experience of being mentored like for women faculty?"

Phenomenology is an interpretive research methodology, which is aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of lived experience. The phenomenologist investigates the experience, seeking an authentic account from the perspective of the participant based on a dialog between researcher and participant (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology involves searching for the essences or commonalities of shared human experience, and a rigorous analysis of these experiences is required in order that the basic elements or essence of these experiences can be understood (Patton, 1990). An essence, as defined by Giorgi (1997), is "the most invariant meaning for a context. It is the articulation, based on intuition, of a fundamental meaning without which a phenomenon could not present itself as it is" (p. 242).

Methods

In order to best gain insight into the nature and meaning of the experience of being mentored for women faculty, I sought participants who stated that they had either previously or currently been engaged as a protégé in a mentoring relationship or relationships. The mentorships could be either formal or informal, with a faculty member or administrator (male or female), and at the same or varying ranks. The key criterion in the selection of participants was the assertion of the faculty member that she had been or was currently involved as a protégé in what she considered to be a mentoring relationship.

In order to locate those women who perceived that they had been mentored, e-mails describing the study were sent to female faculty on two listings of participants in a faculty development program sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning Services at the University of Minnesota. Seven women faculty who had experienced mentoring responded affirmatively to this e-mail, all of whom became participants in the study. Two additional participants were women faculty currently working at other universities who, upon conversing with me about my study and the criteria for participation, indicated that they had experienced mentoring as faculty members and volunteered to participate.

The nine participants in this study were all full-time women faculty members in educational institutions that grant baccalaureate degrees and above. Their faculty rank at the time of the interviews ranged from Instructor to Professor, with one Instructor, three Assistant Professors, two Associate Professors, and three Professors. The participants' ages ranged from 37 to 53 and their years of experience as faculty ranged from one year to 22 years. Disciplines also varied, with three from social sciences, two from life sciences, one from health sciences, one from behavioral sciences, one from education, and one from business.

Participant Interviews

I used the method of conversational interviewing to gather information from each faculty member on her experiences of being mentored. Each interview lasted from one and a half to two hours. During the interviews, I focused on what it was like to be mentored, prompting the participants to recollect those instances or situations that would reflect this experience to the fullest and staying close to the experience as it was lived. Questions were generated that focused on how the relationships were established, the interaction between the mentor and protégé, the proteges' feelings about the relationships, and the attributes of these relationships.

While conducting the interviews and later, during the process of theme analysis, I was aware of the need to be fully present to the phenomenon as it was described by the participants. As noted by Dalhberg and Drew (1997), "Objectivity in phenomenological research does not mean standing outside of the research arena, but rather, critically examining one's involvement and history with the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 306). These authors further note that the concept of openness supports objectivity, in that openness allows the phenomenon to present itself to the researcher as it really is (Dalhberg & Drew, 1997). I attempted to achieve the capacity for openness (for being surprised) throughout the research process as described below.

Prior to the interviews, I initially examined what I knew about the phenomenon of mentoring based upon my experience and reading and endeavored to bring that knowledge into conscious awareness by documenting these thoughts in written format. In this way, I could acknowledge my preunderstandings about the phenomenon and then consciously set them aside or bracket them as I prepared to interview the participants in the study. During the interviews, I attempted to

maintain openness by staying as close to the participants' experiences of being mentored as possible. The awareness of my beliefs and my assumptions enabled me to generate open questions that sought insight rather than confirmation of my beliefs. As stated by Gadamer (1989), "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (p. 269).

Analysis of Themes

The audiotapes of each interview were transcribed with a pseudonym identified for each participant to maintain confidentiality. I read the transcripts using the selective reading approach which, as defined by van Manen (1997), involves looking for phrases or statements that stand out, and selecting those that seem to be essential or revealing about the phenomenon being described. In this way, I attempted to capture and grasp the themes, discerning commonalities by identifying key phrases and by summarizing the main thrust of the meaning of the themes (van Manen, 1997). I noted each category of meaning as I read through the transcripts, identifying the statements from the interview text that fell under each category. I then began to cluster these categories under themes as these began to emerge, identifying preliminary words to describe these themes. However, I kept the entire interview transcript intact to enable me to go back to the text and look at the whole of the experience. This process continued through many iterations. As I revised the themes, I continued to go back to the words of the participants to ensure that the text confirmed my understanding. In addition, I sent the preliminary draft of the themes to the participants, asking them to review and specifically look for any quotes that I might have used in which they felt there was a possibility that they could be identified.

In discussing theme analysis, van Manen (1997) notes the following: "In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is" (p. 107). I continually asked myself, as I was identifying themes, whether the phenomenon could exist without this aspect or quality. This process led me to identify five essential themes of the experience of being mentored for women faculty, without which this phenomenon could not be what it is.

Findings: The Experience of Being Mentored

"I feel I have always had a champion."—*Barb, Professor*

The mentoring relationships described by the participants were with faculty or administrators of both genders, of varying rank in the professorate, both informally and formally assigned. Mentors were, in some instances, also in a supervisory capacity and were both internal and external to the protégé's institution. The themes that emerged were reflective of the experience of being mentored, overall, for women faculty.

The experience of being mentored had a profound impact on the careers of the women faculty in this study. The essential themes of this experience explicated the nature and meaning of this experience in their lives. The first theme reflected the meaning that these women ascribed to having someone who truly cared about their well-being and who acted in their best interest. The second theme accounted for the strong feeling of connection these women had with their mentors. The third theme described the role that mentoring provided in affirming and validating the worth of protégés. The fourth theme explicated the nature of being mentored in that these women felt that they were not alone in their experiences as faculty members. Finally, the fifth theme recognized that politics were a part of their experience, affecting the mentoring that was provided to women faculty. These five essential themes are described below:

Theme I: Having Someone Who Truly Cares and Acts in One's Best Interest

"Real mentors really try to help you figure out what is in your best interest."—*Laura, Professor*

"I felt that they cared about what I was doing and that they had a vested interest in me."—*Sue, Assistant Professor*

"His willingness to give me good information about myself . . . he really seemed to want to do it and cared."—*Wendy, Assistant Professor*

In describing their experiences of being mentored, the women faculty participants expressed that they perceived that their mentor was someone who truly cared about them and who acted in their best in-

terest. They saw this in the many facets of the relationship: in the openness of their mentors to being asked for advice; in the advice mentors gave that protégés felt was in their best interest; in the care their mentors evidenced about their well-being; and in how their mentors provided opportunities and sponsorship. The perception that mentors truly cared about protégés and acted in their best interest distinguished mentoring from support received from non-mentors. Protégés perceived that their mentors helped them to see themselves better and the advice offered by mentors was not viewed as prescriptive, given as it was, in the best interest of the protégé. Mentors were also seen as having a desire to mentor; to truly care about the well-being of another.

Theme II: A Feeling of Connection

“I would say that the reason why I’m attracted to [my mentors] . . . is because there’s something about them that I’m seeing that is like me.”—*Laura, Professor*

“And so I think he saw me as the closest thing he’s found to a kindred spirit so far.”—*Lillian, Associate Professor*

“He was a wonderful administrator and that was very clear to me. . . . he’d be very honest about issues that were troubling him, issues on his mind.”—*Barb, Professor*

A feeling of connection emerged as an essential theme of the experience of being mentored for women faculty. This connection was facilitated by protégés seeing that their mentors had particular expertise and that they were willing to share their experiences in a way that expressed their humanity. Protégés were receptive to being mentored, to taking advice and figuring out how to apply it within the context of their own careers. This sense of connection was also based on a perception of common ground or a common way of understanding that protégés shared with their mentors. The underlying relationship was based on trust, which protégés saw as being firmly grounded in the value system of the mentor. This sense of connection also enabled protégés to feel accepted and helped them to accept their mentors’ imperfections.

Theme III: Being Affirmed of One's Worth

"What these three [mentors] did was take me seriously and make it clear to me that if I wanted it, I had a great career ahead of me. If I wanted it, it was mine to develop."—*Barb, Professor*

"She always gave credit . . . I would hear from my friend [name] or hear from the Dean of another college, [Mentor's name] just sang your praises to us."—*Ellen, Professor*

"I still consider myself a mentee and he's considering that I might be even outstripping him in certain areas so it's like he's appreciating what I'm accomplishing."—*Nancy, Assistant Professor*

The affirmation of their worth that protégés received emerged as essential to the experience of being mentored for these women faculty. In being mentored, women faculty felt affirmed of their worth as teachers and scholars. Protégés received validation that they were both talented and highly capable of performing their various roles as faculty members. This affirmation was seen in mentors taking protégés seriously; in mentors' expression of protégés' worth to others; in how mentors helped protégés to maintain confidence throughout the ups and downs of academic life; and in the expectation of mentors that protégés would carry on their academic legacy. Protégés felt privileged and lucky to have these relationships.

Theme IV: Not Being Alone

"He'll always be there. . . if I ever need anything."—*Linda, Associate Professor*

"You know that somebody's there to talk to about it."—*Wendy, Assistant Professor*

"And they're still feeling the same things I'm feeling! . . . You know, I'm not alone."—*Rebecca, Instructor*

In having a mentoring relationship, women faculty felt that they were not alone in their experiences as faculty members. Protégés had someone who was there to help them get through it; to provide them with needed insight and advice at various points in their careers. Mentors role modeled what was important in academic life and offered an inside perspective on how things were done in various academic

cultures. They were there to encourage protégés to take the next steps in their careers. Throughout their careers, these women had a variety of mentors who provided them with assistance. Although these mentors were seen as senior to them in some ways, protégés felt that they were treated as colleagues. They found that others were struggling with the same issues, which provided reassurance that they were not alone in what they were facing. And finally, there was a transmission of mentoring, in that having had good mentoring these women expressed an interest in mentoring others.

Theme V: Politics Are Part of One's Experience

"It's not only the people that allows [mentoring] to happen . . . it's the culture that allows it to happen."—*Laura, Professor*

"It is essentially stated by faculty, if not the department head, that we're here to support these people, and if we don't do a good job in the mentoring committee, how else are they going to know what they have to do?"—*Ellen, Professor*

"I felt there are certain areas where either he or I would've felt that he wasn't the best advisor. Like where is it better, which department is more compatible, for a woman."—*Barb, Professor*

The experience of being mentored for women faculty could not be fully understood without the recognition that politics were a part of their experience. As noted, the experience of being mentored was one that women faculty felt profoundly affected their experiences as faculty members; however, permeating their experiences was the awareness of the academic environment and culture in which mentoring occurs. Having a culture that was committed to their success made a considerable difference in the provision of mentoring and in what protégés felt was possible to achieve within their academic environments. Although many women felt supported in dealing with issues specific to being a woman in academia, gaps were identified in how issues specific to gender were addressed as part of a mentoring relationship.

Discussion

"I've always believed that one woman's success can only help another woman's success."—*Gloria Vanderbilt, Designer, Poet*

“ . . . every one of us can take a step to open a door for another woman, to act as a mentor, to take the chance or the risk to take that next job, to actually go out and compete or find another woman who will take that job.”—*Judith Sturnick, President, The Union Institute* (Rios & Longnion, 2000)

In contrast to prior studies which tended to describe various characteristics of different types of mentorships, the current study focused on the commonalities of the experience *across* the varying characteristics of different types of mentoring relationships—formal and informal, with peers and senior faculty, with male and female mentors, and with mentors who were internal and external to the protégés’ institutions. Although recognizing that mentoring relationships can take many forms, the main focus of this study was on the essential themes, overall, of this experience.

As noted earlier, a review of the literature on definitions of mentoring found that there was neither a consistent definition of mentoring nor a common description of mentoring roles. The women protégés in the current study described relationships that fell at various points on the continuum of mentoring, which would support the concept that varying types of mentoring relationships exist in the academic environment. In addition, an element of reciprocity was found, in that protégés felt that they were treated as colleagues and that the mentor also received benefits from being a participant in the relationship.

The findings of the current study also provided some clarity as to the distinction made between mentoring and support. Although prior definitions of mentoring in the literature ranged from relationships that provide support and advice to those that would be characterized as highly developmental, the women protégés in this study perceived that support received from colleagues was different than mentoring. Mentors were seen as being truly interested in the protégés’ best interests and having this as their priority, while colleagues, although seen as supportive, did not initiate communication or have the same perceived level of investment in the relationship.

In addition, the findings of this study supported the need for mentoring over the course of a faculty member’s career. Sue, an Assistant Professor, clearly stated the importance of gaining the information needed to just survive in the early years. “During that first year survival was very important, just trying to figure out how to get stuff done and not feel like everything was going to crumble around you” (Sue). However, as noted by Laura, “Mentoring is something that you can use throughout your career. . . . In other words, I don’t think that

because I'm a full professor I don't need a mentor. . . . I don't feel that [way] at all in an academic environment." It would seem that the type of assistance—the kind of mentoring needed—varied at different points in the faculty members' careers, based on what the faculty members' primary needs were during that period.

The current study found that regardless of the structure or nature of the relationship, there were essential themes of the experience of being mentored overall for women faculty. These women defined many types of relationships as mentoring; however, the essential themes of this experience were found across all of these relationships. One could posit that, for a relationship to be considered as mentoring, the definition of mentoring is less important than whether these essential themes exist in the relationship. In addition, this study confirmed the underlying premise of both the research-based and popular literature on mentoring. The women faculty in this study perceived the experience of being mentored as having a profound effect on their ability to achieve success in academic institutions.

Implications of Findings

The nature of phenomenological research provided a unique opportunity to discover the essence of the experience of being mentored for women faculty. In contrast to the focus of previous literature, the current study looked holistically at this experience in terms of the essential themes of being mentored across a variety of types of mentoring experiences.

The key implications of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Due to its high perceived value, mentoring should be considered in academia as a means to contribute to the career success of women faculty.
2. Opportunities for faculty who are receptive to mentoring to make connections with those who have a desire to mentor should be actively facilitated. This is especially important for women faculty as they can be more isolated than their male counterparts.
3. The themes of the relationship could be used as both a screening tool for potential mentors and as a means of educating those engaged in establishing mentoring programs or practices on the essential attributes of these relationships for women faculty.
4. Cultural supports for facilitating the success of faculty in academia

should be considered, including the selection of department heads who are committed to facilitating mentoring and the establishment of mentoring committees.

5. Cross-institution mentoring programs for women could be enhanced as a means to avoid some of the political constraints of being mentored in one's academic department.
6. Mentoring of others should be included as a component of faculty evaluation for tenure or promotion, so as to encourage more faculty to make this role a priority.

The current study also supports the provision of mentoring as an important component of campus climate improvement initiatives for women in the academic environment. The findings point toward the establishment of a model of academic leadership that is committed to the success of the more diverse population of faculty members that is now present in academic institutions.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research focused solely on the experience of being mentored for women faculty. However, the literature suggests that the experiences of minority faculty members present some unique challenges, especially for minority women. As noted by Blake-Beard (1999), the literature on mentoring carries with it the "implicit assumption that the experiences of White women represent the experiences of all women" (p. 22). A similar study, looking at the essential themes of the experience of being mentored for minority women faculty, would be warranted. An additional area of research might be to look at the experiences of being mentored for male faculty, as mentoring can be beneficial to all faculty regardless of gender.

The current study, which focused on a small sample of women faculty who stated that they had been mentored, found that these women had a variety of mentors over the course of their academic careers. Further research is recommended that would explore the incidence of mentoring in higher education from the perspective of those who perceive that they have been engaged in these relationships.

The connection between two individuals was seen as critical in the establishment of mentoring relationships. Additional research on the development of a connection between two individuals in a mentoring relationship and how that connection and relationship develops and

changes over time would lend additional insight into the establishment and maintenance of relationships that women perceive as mentoring. In addition, this study focused on the experience of being mentored from the perspective of the protégé; a corollary study on the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentor would provide additional insight into these relationships. Further research on mentor-protégé pairs to determine commonalities and differences in aspects of the relationship as perceived by these two parties would also provide additional information on the dynamics of these relationships.

Finally, the current study found that having a departmental culture committed to the success of faculty fostered the provision of mentoring. Additional description of what is meant by a mentoring culture would yield insight into the degree of importance that the context of the relationship has on the mentoring that is provided in an academic setting.

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