



5-2014

## Academic Mentoring of Social Work Faculty: A Group Experience With a Feminist Influence

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### Recommended Citation

Atchinson, Alana B.; Murphy, Lisa M.; Gurrola, Maria A.; Lee, Cheryl D.; and Simon, Shirley. Academic Mentoring of Social Work Faculty: A Group Experience With a Feminist Influence. *Social Group Work: We Are All in the Same Boat*, , : 31-45, 2014. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Social Work: School of Social Work Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Proceedings of the XXXIII International Symposium  
on Social Work with Groups  
Long Beach, California, USA, June 2-5, 2011

**Social Group Work:**  
**We are all in the same boat**

*Edited by*  
**Cheryl D. Lee**

**w&b**

**MMXIV**

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# Academic mentoring of social work faculty:

## A group experience with a feminist influence

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*Abstract: Using theory and principles of group process, and influenced by feminist theory of co-mentoring, a group of social work educators met monthly in a telephone mediated support group. The purpose of the group was to offer support to faculty involved in the tenure process in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. This paper offers an analysis of this experience. Suggestions for improved mentoring of social work faculty will be explored and areas for further research will be identified.*

*Keywords: mentoring, telephone mediated groups, social work faculty*

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## Introduction

The start of a new tenure-track faculty member's career can be a stressful time filled with job insecurities and questions about expectations. As the number of tenure-track faculty appointments has declined and new hires are held to increasingly higher standards of productivity, the sense of vulnerability on the part of new faculty has intensified (Finkelstein, 2003; Graubard, 2001). Mentoring can help new faculty succeed in academic life. The mentor-protégé relationship has been a subject of discussion and research in both the business and academic worlds for many years. Although the mentoring relationship may be an especially important tool for academic success for new

social work faculty, discipline specific research exploring mentoring of junior faculty has been scant. This lack is evidenced not only in research journals but also in primary professional publications. For example, there was no entry for "mentor" in either the *Social Work Dictionary*, 3rd edition (1995), or the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 19th edition (1995). A more recent entry in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups* addresses mentoring but is not specifically about junior faculty in an academic environment (Lee & Montiel, 2009). Additionally, the few studies that specifically explore mentoring of *new* social work faculty focus exclusively on individual mentoring relationships (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002).

Using theory and principles of group process, and influenced by feminist theory of co-mentoring (McGuire & Reger, 2003), a group of social work educators, four untenured and two tenured, met monthly, via telephone conference calls, to support the work of individual members and the group as a whole. This paper offers an analysis of this experience. Suggestions for improved mentoring of social work faculty are explored, and areas for further research are identified.

## **Review of literature**

### **Women in academics**

The field of academia has changed over recent decades as the number of women taking tenure track positions in universities grows; however, despite the increased presence of women on campuses, a disproportionate number of men continue to hold the majority of both high ranking administrative and full-time tenure track positions (Bakian & Sullivan, 2010). While men are more likely to hold full-time positions in research, women are commonly found as part-time faculty focused on teaching (Hart, 2011; Carr, 2001). This division is especially troublesome, as statistics show that in the last decade similar number of PhDs were awarded to men and women (Cantor, 2010). It is important to note that while the total number of PhDs awarded was split nearly evenly between men and women, when examining the individual numbers by field, gender division reflected a gross imbalance. Fields such as nursing and the humanities were dominated by women, while

mathematics and sciences were heavily laden with males (Carr, 2001). Additionally, within this context, women experience advancement of research careers to a lesser degree than their male counterparts (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007).

## **Mentoring**

Research has shown that the mentoring process is essential for new professors to successfully navigate the world of academia (Gee & Norton, 2009; Wasserstein, Quistberg & Shea, 2007). This is particularly true for women, and examining gender bifurcation within the mentoring dyad has shown that within academia, the total number of male mentors outnumber female mentors, but those female mentors often had many more female than male protégés (Perna, Lerner & Yura, 1995). After a woman is hired in a tenure track position, the experience can be isolating, as demonstrated in an auto-ethnographic study by Hellsten, Martin, McIntyre, and Kinzel (2011), and women frequently experience the tenure track very differently from their male counterparts. In addition to isolation, women in the academy have reported discrimination and a social network that they are unable to access as two marked difficulties faced when navigating the world of academia (Foster et al., 2000; Wolfinger, Mason, Goulden, 2008). In 1999, Australia adopted an action plan to target inequalities in Australian universities, through which formal mentoring was used, under the assumption that when mentoring is informal, women may often be excluded (Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, & Marshall, 2007). It seems universal that mentoring plays a positive role in improving the status of women in academia, and is shown to be most effective when there is a complementary fit between the mentor and the protégé, especially when the mentor is formally recognized and/or rewarded for his or her efforts in the process (Gee & Norton, 2009). Gee and Norton (2009) also observed that women should be cautious of time commitments outside of specific field work, as committee work can be time consuming and ultimately less advantageous in career advancement. Of course, it is also imperative for a successful mentoring relationship that a hierarchal system of oppression is not in place; to avoid that, some institutions favor peer mentoring as a means to connect similarly aligned faculty to reduce insecurities, which ultimately leads to further isolation (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill & Pitts Bannister, 2009).

## **Family and social obligations**

Family seems to be another area where, in the context of success in academia, women face more difficulties than male colleagues. This is particularly true for women who have children under the age of six (Wolfinger, Manson & Goulden, 2008). In fact, even when programs and services have been created to assist women with families, they are often reluctant to use these services through fear of appearing to be taking advantage of their position or being viewed as doing less work than women with no children or their male counterparts, regardless of the males' parental status (Hellsten, Martin, McIntyre & Kinzel, 2011). Wolfinger, Manson and Goulden (2008) also found that having a family has a different effect based on gender. For men, having a family, including children, has a positive effect; yet for women, the opposite was found. The same study also found that for single Ph.D. graduates, gender was not strongly indicative of their future success in academia; in fact, single women fared slightly better than men (Wolfinger, Manson & Goulden, 2008). Additionally, women often finish Ph.D. degrees during what is often viewed as prime childbearing years. This often creates a predicament for women who may be forced to choose between a family and a career (Mavriplis et al., 2010).

## **Mentoring social work faculty**

New social work educators have reported that mentoring was especially beneficial to their teaching and research (Wilson, Pereira & Valentine, 2002). This qualitative study also found that new female social work educators valued the mentoring they received, especially with regard to networking and research (2002). It is important to note that even in the field of social work, a profession where women are the majority, high end administrative positions are still largely filled by men (Bent-Goodley & Sarnoff, 2008; Sakamoto, Anastas, McPhail & Colarossi, 2008). Social work as a discipline and practice strives for social justice, and the lack of women in administrative positions is an ongoing issue that is currently being confronted in this profession (Bent-Goodley & Sarnoff, 2008). In conjunction with social justice themes, knowledge about mentoring in social work education within underrepresented minority groups is not readily available; however, Simon, Perry and Roff (2008) found that a group of African American

women sought and received more mentoring regarding their doctoral studies and faculty expectations than regarding balancing their career and family issues. The limited research on mentoring across cultural, racial, and gender barriers often addresses new models of mentoring, including new conceptualizations of roles, implementing practices that promote mentoring within academia, and the relatively new concept of multiple mentoring (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). For multiple mentoring, the mentoring process is a group- or partner-based journey, typically non-hierarchical, collaborative, and designed to mentor specific subject areas (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). In a study of gender differentiation among social work faculty at both Canadian and United States universities, Sakamoto et al. (2008) found that similarities exist between the two countries in regard to gender disparities. While there are far too many variables to make concrete assertions, similar patterns of underrepresentation emerge in terms of tenure, administrative positions, and promotions of female faculty members in both countries (Sakamoto et al., 2008).

## **Trust and mentoring in academia**

Trust is a very significant factor that emerges in the literature regarding mentoring, and it is especially vital in those mentoring relationships that bridge gender and culture. It is easy to establish and perceive trust when both mentor and protégé have commonalities; yet, when differences exist, discomfort may arise, which if not properly navigated may develop into distrust (Shollen, Bland, Taylor, Weber-Main & Mulcahy, 2008). Shollen et al. also observed that trust leads to mutual understanding and symbiosis, and provides a space for growth and learning within the mentoring dyad (2008). Trust within academia is often difficult to achieve due to the constant competition for resources and promotions (Hart, 2011). Due in part to these reasons, trust is often avoided in order to reduce the vulnerability of women within academia. Often, non-spoken rules dictate actions that create a hostile environment, even when there is no clear threat to these women (Cantor, 2010). Research is vital to upward mobility in academia, and trust and expertise can have a negative effect on the mentoring relationship if both the mentor and protégé have a vested interest in the same area of research. In a study of female social work faculty, a

new educator shared an area of interest in research with her mentor, and found that the mentor assumed a patronizing role, rather than offering expertise and respect as a colleague to the new faculty member (Wilson, Pereira, & Valentine, 2002).

## **Methodology**

### **Design, data collection and analysis**

The mentoring group met by phone for one hour once a month for a two year period. After meeting for 18 months, the group participants anonymously answered 10 open-ended questions (Appendix A) after receiving University Institutional Review Board approval. The results for each question were compiled and analyzed for themes in the responses. Two members of the group (not the group organizer) independently analyzed the responses. Inter-rater reliability was at an 85% level.

### **Sample**

In this group of six, all of the members were female and ranged in age from 32-62. Three of the group members were white, two were Mexican-American, and one group member was Native American/White. Group members varied in academic rank. Four group members were untenured assistant professors. Among this group of untenured assistant professors, one each had finished her second, third, fourth, and fifth year. A fifth group member was a tenured assistant professor. The sixth group member was a tenured full professor. One of the group members was at a research one institution, three group members were at research two institutions and two group members were at primarily teaching institutions.

## Results

The main overarching theme that came up during several questions was "trust." This theme was interesting for several reasons. First, most of the group members had never met one another in person. It is often difficult to trust people one has never met in person. Trust can be particularly difficult when one cannot see and observe the body language of the other group members during meetings. Also, the field of academia, like many other professions, is very small, and one is not always aware of the external relationships group members may have and how those relationships might influence one's future. Third, the different academic ranks of some of the participants created issues of trust and feelings of vulnerability. Lastly, because of trust and vulnerability at their home institutions, several group members had problems trusting the group in the beginning. For example, one group participant stated, "When I started with the group, I was hesitant to share issues that I felt vulnerable about. Over time I have come to trust the other group members and tend to trust more and share more."

Most of the group participants had experienced some form of mentoring at various points in their career. Many had experienced dissertation mentoring. Some participants had experienced mentoring at their home institution, while others had not. One group member said, "I work with a group of colleagues where the senior researcher serves as a mentor. She is guiding the group to projects and gets us involved in different projects to increase our research, publications and be successful in the tenure process." This was one example of a supportive mentoring environment. However, there were many examples of non-supportive home institution environments. One participant said, "I have looked for mentoring in my home institution but have not been particularly successful." A few of the group participants who had not experienced mentoring at their home institution had sought mentoring through professional organizations. For example, one group member said, "Prior to this experience I had approached mentoring through the Division on Women and Crime. There are several feminist scholars who are part of the Division that have been great resources."

Participants were motivated to join the mentoring group for several different reasons. A few group members were having trust issues at their home institutions and were looking for support during the tenure and promotion process. One participant explained her situation and her decision to join the group:

*I met the group organizer at the group camp/group conference in 2008. After several conversations about academic life and the importance of mentoring, she invited me to join the group. Having been unsuccessful finding a mentor in my home institution, I was excited to join this group. I am nervous about the tenure and promotion process at my institution and was looking for support and input from other faculty. After a very difficult first year at my home institution, I was very hesitant to talk with colleagues because I did not trust them to not use information I shared against me during the evaluation process. I particularly like being able to talk with faculty from other institutions because of the trust issues I have at home.*

A second reason members were motivated to join the group was to get support and feedback from others. One group member said,

*It seemed like a good opportunity to learn more about the experiences of others and get support/feedback on issues that emerge regarding teaching and publishing from the point of view of someone outside of one's institution.*

The convenience of the group was another reason members chose to join. Since the group did not require a large time commitment on the part of the group members and the meetings were via telephone once a month, members believed it was something they could fit into their schedules. One member said,

*I also decided to join because I knew it was going to be by phone, this is convenient because I do not have to go out of my house and I can do it while I am cooking dinner or getting ready to put my kids to bed. Time is very limited when you have young children, and there is no time to go out of the home to meet with others and talk about what is going on in our job. This also gave us the opportunity to talk to people in other universities.*

Lastly, some group members thought by joining the group they might be able to help other group members. One group member explained

*I joined the mentoring group to help some of my colleagues. I believe in mentoring and wanted to give something which I wish I would have had.*

Group members were asked if they thought mentoring in the group was different from individual mentoring. A few participants stated they did not notice any differences between individual and group mentoring. However, several group members listed some of the advantages and disadvantages they thought were present with this style of group mentoring. One participant thought an advantage of group mentoring was that it involved a "more collaborative process with equality among peers." Another participant said, "Mentoring in a group is nice because I like when other people bring up issues that I have been thinking about. It makes me feel like I am not alone in my experiences or how I am feeling." However, mentoring group participants did believe there were a couple of disadvantages. One participant believed there was "less time to focus on one's personal issues." Another participant stated, "At least in my case, I do not personally know all of the group members so this may play a role in how much I'm willing to share about specific issues." The disadvantages listed by participants were considerably fewer than the advantages listed. Overall, group members saw much benefit to the group mentoring process.

Participants were asked what they would change about the group. Group members suggested they wanted to work on building the trust in the group. One group member explained,

*I am little more cautious about some of the issues I raise in the group setting. I have had some very bad experiences and don't always have confidence that people will keep things within a group. When I was going through some of the stuff with my former employer I didn't say everything that was going on. However, I did share some of it. This group was nice because they listened and kept stuff in the group. As I was seeking mentoring in my former department, I attempted individual mentoring and those people were not trustworthy so I guess it just depends on the group and the individual person and you always need to be aware of who you can trust and who you can't.*

Two of the group members work in the same department at the same institution, which also led to some hesitancy about which subjects might be discussed in the group, especially because one member had a higher rank than the other group member. There seemed to be a fear among group members that what was said in the group might not stay in the group.

The meeting time was another thing some members wanted to change. However, there was some discrepancy among group members about the time of day that worked the best. For example, one group

member stated, "The time is difficult for me. I am the only member on the East Coast so the calls are late for me. However, I find the benefits of being a part of the group to outweigh this inconvenience." On the other hand, one group member suggested, "It would be nice to have conversations a little later in the evening so I can participate a little more." The mentoring phone calls usually took place around five o'clock in the evening Pacific Coast time. A few group members wanted to change the structure of the meetings. One suggestion was to initiate a better method of communication (i.e., video chat or other online processes)." The role of the group participants was another issue that was suggested as a way to improve closeness and trust in the group. One participant observed, "Our current project is this research. It's brought us closer together I think so maybe more projects. Not sure of that since we are all so incredibly busy." These were all minor suggestions to improve the group overall but they appear to pertain to building trust and better group cohesion in the future.

Last, group members were asked how they thought diversity was dealt with within the mentoring group. Some group members reported that diversity was not addressed in the group while others thought it was adequately addressed. For example, one group member considered diversity to be a difficult issue for people to address so it was not dealt with at all, even though group members were very diverse. She stated, "We are diverse in many ways and we talk about it yet I don't think we touch on every issue of diversity. I think even in this setting it is difficult to talk about some issues." Yet, another group member found that there was an acceptance of the roles of others. She said, "One of the biggest differences is the parents and non-parents. Group members seem to be accepting of these differences. I feel the group members are open-minded about differences in culture. We could discuss this more." There seems to be room to discuss diversity in all of its different forms that affect women in academia, including the issues of parenthood and the decision to have or not to have children as an academic.

Overall, there are advantages and disadvantages to mentoring over the telephone but members seemed to enjoy the process and have benefitted from the group. One member stated, "When I started with the group, I was hesitant to share issues that I felt vulnerable about. Over time I have come to trust the other group members and tend to trust more and share more." Another participant shared, "I see how the group members help when individuals are down and out. This gives me a very positive feeling like the group is worth it. I've received a lot of

support.” These results support a feminist model of group mentoring that seems to have benefitted several junior faculty members as they navigate the tenure and promotion process. One group member summed up the group mentoring experience in the following way:

*Rather than seeking guidance with help related to the specific process at my home institution, I tend to turn to the group for three things:*

- 1. As a place to discuss issues related to teaching*
- 2. As a place to find support and encouragement for scholarship*
- 3. For general camaraderie with other academics, ones I have grown to trust.*

## **Limitations**

The study had a small sample size and may not be generalizable to other female social work faculty. Members of the group analyzed the data, which may have biased the results. Qualitative data by its nature has a subjective element.

## **Summary and recommendations**

It was apparent in this qualitative study that mentoring of newer social work female faculty is desirable to improve success in the academic arena, which is consistent with prior research (Bent-Goodley & Sarnoff, 2008; Sakamoto et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2007). Like other studies of mentoring in academia, this study found that mentoring is essential for traversing the tenure track process (Gee & Norton, 2009; Wasserstein, Quistberg & Shea, 2007). Members of the mentoring group who consisted of social work faculty found the group to be a place to discuss teaching and scholarship issues and to find friends to prevent isolation (Hellsten et al., 2011). Further, members received tenure, retention and/or promotions during the two year period of the group. Group mentoring, as opposed to individual one-on-one mentoring, allowed the members to discover

that their issues were experienced by others and to garner mutual aid (Gitterman & Shulman, 2005). The use of telephone technology made the group accessible, especially for female faculty who also had young families. The literature discusses discrimination toward women with young children in academia who are often viewed as not doing their fair share of the work (Wolfinger et al., 2008; Hellstein et al., 2011). In contrast, the women who were parents of young children in this study felt they received support from other group members, including those who did not have young children.

As in other mentoring studies, trust was a major theme and is essential for mentoring to progress (Shollen et al., 2008). There were several factors that inhibited trust from developing in this group: most members had not met each other in person and feared that information would not be kept confidential within the relatively small social work academic community. In addition, the academic work place, which is highly competitive for resources, is known as a barrier to trust among faculty in general (Cantor, 2011; Hart, 2011). The results indicated that over time, the group became a safe place where members felt they could be more open and receive support even though members expressed past experiences in academia where trust was not found in individual one-on-one mentoring relationships.

Several recommendations emanate from this study. The results indicate that although mentoring in a group has some drawbacks such as less time to attend to an individual problem and a greater possibility of a breach in confidentiality, the members overall were satisfied with the group experience, felt they learned more from peer input than would be possible in one-to-one mentoring, and liked the convenience of meeting monthly by telephone. The implementation of additional mentoring groups are recommended but will require additional research since very few group mentoring studies have been completed.

The establishment of a mentoring group of members from varied institutions should be considered due to the competitive nature in most home institutions. Meeting by telephone was considered a plus but did preclude the reading of body language. The use of video technology is recommended to improve communication. The group decided to evaluate their mentoring experience, and this project brought the group closer together as they planned the research, wrote a manuscript, analyzed the data, and created a proposal and presentation for the IASWG international symposium. The group participants highly recommend group projects for this type of group. The fact that this mentoring group could meet in person at the IASWG Long Beach

Symposium was a special way to foster cohesion. A combination of technology mediated sessions with at least one face-to-face meeting at some point in person is highly recommendation.

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## **Appendix A. Qualitative questionnaire**

- What other ways have you approached faculty mentoring prior to this experience?
- Tell me about your decision/motivation to join the mentoring group?
- How is mentoring in a group different from individual mentoring for you?
- What are the differences between issues you raise in a group setting and those you raise in individual mentoring sessions?
- How has the group changed over time for you?
- What have you taken from the group mentoring experience?
- How can we improve the group mentoring experience?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of mentoring over the telephone?
- What are other comments you have about the mentoring group?