

Symposium Themes and Lucia's Coda
Cross-generational mentoring:
Ethics, Feminist Principles, and Professional Development

Date of symposium: June 4, 2005

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August 12, 2005

Symposium Themes

“Mentoring involves mutuality, affirmation, and survival. Cross-generational feminist mentoring uses the resources of different generations to identify and challenge the dominant discourses and practices in ways that empower and transform. It is about putting feminist beliefs into action across generations through informal and formal mentoring practices.”

(Gilbert & Gilbert, 2005).

Mentoring occurs within a sociocultural/political context. The one-day symposium considered key aspects of this context over the past three decades, particularly the extent to which academic and organizational settings have made changes that reflect feminist principles of inclusion and equal opportunity. The conference's varied and rich themes are integrated within the framework of Melissa and Lucia Gilbert's presentation on "Feminist Mentoring: Successes and Necessary Next Steps." These themes from the working conference elucidate both effective cross-generational feminist mentoring and its ongoing challenges.

Theme 1. Connecting our graduate students with colleagues nationally to create and maintain a support network.

Without involving those new to the field, we cannot maintain effective cross-generational feminist mentoring. In addition, we inadvertently run the risk of perpetuating the status quo because one tends to see the world largely through the opportunities and constraints of one's own generation. As women and members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups continue to face multiple obstacles in the workplace, we can help ourselves, and one another, through our collective power. Older

women and men offer wisdom and experience; younger women and men offer energy and new ideas. Through combining efforts and helping one another to achieve feminist goals, the obstacles become less ominous.

Forms of sexism are more covert than in the past.

Although overt sexism still exists, women who build careers in academia today face fewer experiences with systemic and blatant sexism than women two or three decades ago. However, despite these gains, sexism still clearly affects women's professional development and psyches. The more common forms of sexism for many women today are covert and subtle forms (i.e., not being groomed for tenure like male colleagues), and internalized sexism (i.e., the voice from childhood that reiterates in one's head, "girls/women aren't good enough...")

Cross-generational mentoring and networking are crucial in recognizing and dealing with covert sexism in academia.

For many women, achieving success in academic settings is an uphill battle, fraught with pain, poignancy, and hardship. Examples of this pain included the experiences of an African American professor who received the message, "Act like us (White men), and we'll treat you like we treat each other; if not you are on your own"; a tenured professor who experienced racism/sexism/harassment within an overwhelmingly male dominant, privileged academic context; and another presenter's struggle to promote her feminist principles and work against objectification of women—actions which resulted in her being perceived as "difficult to work with." To retain and exercise their voice and position, many women in academia have to endure much, overtly and covertly. Cross-generational mentoring and networking can provide support, guidance, validation, and resources to assist women in recognizing sexism and developing strategies to deal with it effectively.

Theme 2. Teaching and role modeling for students the consistency between holding feminist principles and ideas and living these principles and ideas in one's professional work and personal life.

"Talk the talk and walk the walk," was noted as an important but often not modeled principle. It is crucial to be consistent and reflective about what we advocate in feminist theory and research and what we do in our actual teaching, leadership, and

mentoring practices. Yet, this goal can be hard to accomplish, and even harder to recognize if we are not being consistent. Symposia such as the one today can be instrumental in providing the space for a refocusing of vision and purpose.

Feminist theory can provide a container for understanding the multiple pulls (child-care, self-care, elder-care, career, social justice, etc.) experienced in our society, as well as a way to illuminate how unexamined social roles and values can continue to limit theory, policy, and practice. For example, internalized and external messages of sexism, heterosexism, racism, and ableism not only limit individuals personally; they also limit the development and critique of psychological and societal theory, policy, and practice. Another example discussed was the significant impact that the medicalization of services provision is having on the use of relational aspects of healing.

Theme 3. Providing students and colleagues with a spectrum of ways to make a difference.

Regardless of the focus of their professional work—teaching, research, administration, and/or practice, symposium participants agreed that we needed to do a better job of preparing ourselves, our students, and our colleagues for the hard work that still lies ahead. Learning to read the environment and thinking politically were both identified as key strategies for successfully navigating the challenges of achieving a feminist teaching and working environment.

Cross-generational mentoring processes can provide students and colleagues with a spectrum of ways to make a difference, and the courage and confidence needed to make a difference. Participants described dramatic examples of how the personal is political and how individuals at different levels of an organization can bring about change consistent with feminist goals.

Narrative and language are powerful tools of change.

Language can be used to create meaning and make systemic change. Similarly, sharing stories with subversive narratives or discourses can bring about change. Through the narratives shared by the presenters, participants felt validated, normalized, inspired, motivated, and trusted. Many saw themselves reflected in various aspects of the speakers' narratives or research findings. One Latina graduate student planning an academic career expressed how transformative it felt for her to listen to the presentation, "Women

Hollering: Feminist Latina in the Academy,” which described both the triumphs and the difficulties faced by a more experienced Latina academic. Telling one’s story can be transformative for those who bear witness, as well as for she who shares.

The power of sharing stories lies not only in its ability to convey intellectual understanding but also its power to create emotional understanding. In addition to content, there is connection, affirmation, and validation.

Creating change entails significant risks and significant benefits.

Creating change can incur great personal risk—risk to reputation, to relationships, and to career. One participant found herself a sole feminist voice on campus fighting against sexist practices that objectify and exploit women; in the process she gained a reputation among some students as “difficult.” Several women faculty faced an overload of students interested in working with them such that they had little time for their own scholarly work. At the same time, it was clear that being a change-agent can also have enormous benefits.

The powerful impact that one person can have was evident in a number of the presentations. The presence of a an Hispanic female faculty member in a psychology department provided the needed mentorship for many female Hispanic graduate students, who will in turn go on to create change in their own spheres of influence. A male presenter described the power of bringing a feminist/multicultural perspective to his work with male veterans of war who are suffering. Several presenters described successfully working with their university administrators to address such feminist concerns as sexual assault and work-family policies for faculty women and men. Others discussed working successfully within their communities to bring about feminist change. An important and particularly moving example was the recent Massachusetts legislation on same-sex marriage.

Finally, participants agreed that more dialogue and sharing of experience are needed about how the individual, or groups of individuals, can successfully impact the organizational culture. Although one individual may be able to bring about institutional changes, individuals need to be joined by others to sustain the change. Otherwise they run the risk of becoming tired and discouraged, and leaving. To create lasting change, persistence, buy-in, and creativity are needed. Applying feminist and multicultural

principles in our work often requires stepping “outside of the box” and challenging current assumptions, procedures, and practices. To do so takes cultural self-awareness, social justice activism, reflection, collaboration, vision, and courage.

Changing policy is important—but it is not enough.

Significant gains have been made (albeit not enough) in changing policy to promote and foster women’s careers. Examples include better family leave plans, new hiring practices, and some wage increases. While changing policy is essential, it is not enough. We must also change people’s consciousness—both the internalized sexism that continues to keep women in doubt and guilt, and the sexist and racist attitudes that can marginalize individuals through, for example, implying that women or members of underrepresented minority groups are hired as “affirmative action” hires, or insisting that women cannot be serious about their work if they become pregnant. There appear to be implicit biases against women who are mothers, women and men who wish to use family workplace policies, and women and men who give a priority to family life.

Chance and power can be used wisely when one believes in the process of change.

Earl Koile, one of the presenters and a professor emeritus at UT Austin, taught his students how to subvert power, use power, and gain power, and to accomplish this while staying true to themselves and keeping a strong sense of who they are. We must acknowledge and own our power as teachers, therapists, and mentors. On the one hand, power can be used to oppress, silence, and exploit others. On the other hand, power can be used to enhance, promote, and protect others. As feminists, we are wary of power in the hands of the elite, privileged few. Yet we wish to empower our students and clients, particularly those who have historically been marginalized. We must be self-reflective about the chance aspects of power, the process of taking and using power, and how we use power responsibly and creatively.

Both women and men need to participate in cross-generational feminist mentoring.

One presenter quoted Andrew Ross, who said, “There are many men who are young enough for feminism to have been a primary part of their intellectual development.” Finding a voice as a male in feminism has been part of this presenter’s journey since his undergraduate years. It is important to engage more men in this process. Feminism and feminist causes pertain to women and men. Both women and men must

participate if we are to accomplish the goals of bringing about the political, social, and economic equality between women and men and within groups of women and men.

Coda and Lucia's Personal Reflections as Mentor

There was clear consensus among participants about the transformative power of the conference. What made it transformative was clearly tied to the intellectual and emotional experiences participants brought to the conference through their formal presentations and lively discussions. The positive energy, the excitement of reestablishing a focus for one's work and one's vision for feminist psychology, took place within an atmosphere of trust and creative optimism. The various presentations, voices, and formal and informal discussions framed a space within which the unthinkable became both possible and doable.

One clear success of cross-generational feminist mentoring was experiencing this amazing conference with many of my former students. I was in complete awe of the intelligence in the room, of the trust and respect these women and men from different generations showed toward one another, and of how readily and constructively they engaged a range of difficult dialogues and issues. Attending the symposium, having an interest in the topic of the symposium, and having contributed to feminist psychology through one's own dissertation research and current work also speak to the success of cross-generational mentoring.

Conference participants' dissertation research and current work:

(a) Have given voice to the experiences of women, underrepresented minorities, and understudied populations. Examples include studies of African American and Latina/o populations in various contexts and studies of identity in the gay community and of Peace Corps Volunteers.

(b) Have informed our understanding of traditional areas of research by including important contextual and process variables. Examples include ethical decision-making, sexual harassment, process in group therapy, and mentoring.

(c) Have made theoretical contributions to new areas of scholarship emerging from critiques of traditional research paradigms and conventional psychological theories. Examples here include research on competition between women, same-sex and

heterosexual dual-earner families, dominant discourses and gender processes, sexual harassment, and the meaning of consent, as well as theory development in areas such as parenting, relational theories, gender development, and perfectionism.

A second success from my perspective is the creative energy and validation that cross-generational mentoring provides for the mentor in academia--a validation and excitement I again experienced at the symposium. *Students provide the meaning for why mentoring relationships exist, and their interest, commitment, and questioning feeds the soul of their professors. It is my belief that students are crucial to the success of feminist mentoring. They run a risk in studying feminist fields and in working with feminist professors, hopefully less so today than in the past. The fact that they choose to work with these professors—and perhaps even notice, as I know my students have, when their mentors need their support to bring about important feminist changes or better survive in their work environment—to know that that they do and can make a difference for their mentors, speaks volumes about the successes of feminist mentoring and the deep level of collaboration and shared commitment it involves.*