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## *Full Length Research Paper*

# Women's Talk about Mentoring and Socialization in Local Politics

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Research on mentoring and socialization in organizations determined that there are benefits to mentors, protégés, and organizations derived from these relationships (Burlew, 1991; Kram, 1983). However, previous research largely ignores mentoring and socialization at all levels of politics and political organizations and this study attempts to address this oversight. I pose questions about the extent to which women are mentored in local politics and political organizations. If they are being mentored, who is doing the mentoring? Are they being socialized into politics and political organizations and, if so, by whom? A total of nine women were interviewed and shared their experiences of mentoring and socialization in local politics. Interviewees ranged in age from the early 30s to the late 70s and from School Board to Mayor.

**Keywords:** mentoring, socialization, politics, and women in politics

### Introduction

This study focuses on women in politics. Specifically it addresses some questions about women in local politics. Why are so few women elected to office in the United States? Why do women elected to local office not advance through the ranks up to the national level? Is there something about politics that makes women decide not to get involved or not to continue their involvement? Or are women being largely ignored in politics, leading them to drop out? Scholars and practitioners of organizational communication have been studying relationships and processes that are beneficial to employees within organizations for several decades. Many have noted a relationship between tangible benefits such as promotions and pay increases with mentoring and socialization.

Despite the widespread interest in mentoring and socialization and the benefits to all parties involved, not much research has been done in the area of politics. What little has been done with politics and socialization focuses on political socialization within the family (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002). Little has been written about mentoring and socialization in political organizations or in politics and even less about women running for office. Research on mentoring of political candidates is virtually nonexistent. In this study, I address some of the questions about mentoring and socialization of women in local politics by giving rise to the women's voices. I ask questions about mentoring and socialization of women in local politics in two counties: one Southeastern and one Northeastern. First, I summarize the existing literature on mentoring and

socialization. Next, I explain the methodology and participants. Then I analyze the data, and finally I conclude with a summary of my findings, implications, and future research in this area.

### Literature Summary

An analysis of mentoring and socialization in political organizations must include some consideration of previous work in these areas. As previously noted, not much has been written about mentoring and socialization in politics; I make a leap and examine organizational literature. The following offers a representative rather than exhaustive review of the literature in these areas.

Mentoring has been of interest to researchers and practitioners for several decades, beginning in the 1970s. Mentoring is important in helping to assimilate new members into an organization. The dyadic relationship of mentoring is beneficial to new people: it helps them assimilate an organization's culture, gain access to influential people, and navigate the otherwise rough terrain (e.g. Kram & Isabella, 1985). Research also suggests that there is a relationship between mentoring and promotions and pay increases. Indeed, mentoring, or lack thereof, may very well be the most important determining factor of an individual's career path. The importance of mentoring has been recognized in producing positive gains for workers. Mentoring relationships have also been noted to help in socialization.

Socialization differs from mentoring in that it is not relational. Although relationships are inherent in socialization, it is the process itself that is most important because it is “the process by which a person learns the values, norms, and required behaviors which permit him to participate as a member of the organization” (Van Maanen, 1976, p. 67). Socialization helps organizational members to make sense of organizational events (Louis, 1980) and to establish a situational identity (Katz, 1980; Wanous, 1980). Like mentoring, socialization has been studied in various ways across various disciplines.

### **Mentoring**

Levinson (1978) suggested that a mentor is defined in terms of the character of the relationship and the function it serves rather than the formal role. A mentor’s primary function is to be a transitional figure, someone who fosters the young person’s development, a mixture of parent and peer. Others have defined mentoring in terms of the characteristics of the mentor and protégé (Bolton, 1980; Collin, 1988), the nature of the relationship (Kram & Isabella, 1985), and outcomes of the relationship (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Moore & Sangaria-Danowitz, 1982; Roche, 1979). The result is that a continued lack of clarity about the antecedents, outcomes, characteristics, and mediators of the mentoring relationship leads to definitional vagueness (Jacobi, 1991). However, although the concept lacks a specific definition, one component of mentoring that everyone agrees on is that it is a beneficial relationship for those involved.

Mentoring literature clearly describes several mentoring functions that help protégés. These functions can be career-related, which are directly related to the protégé’s career advancement or psychosocial, which influence the protégé’s self-image and competence (Kram, 1983). The mentoring relationship can also provide different roles filled by the mentor at different times of a protégé’s development: trainer when helping to improve job skills, educator when teaching new tasks, and developer to facilitate personal and professional growth (Burlew, 1991).

Mentoring can also be hierarchical, such as the four-levels found in the academy (Zey, 1991). The first level parallels the socialization process; mentors share informal and formal knowledge about the institution’s norms, rules, mores, and taboos. At the next level the mentor is a source of psychological support, reaching out to the inexperienced protégé through counseling and encouragement. By the third level the mentor is openly supporting the protégé by recommending her or him to other colleagues, and finally, at the fourth level the mentor recommends the protégé for promotion. Schrodt and Sanders (2003) identified five academic mentoring behaviors similar to those identified by Burlew (1991) when they examined mentoring in the academy: research assistance, protection, collegiality, promotion, and friendship, each of which contributes to the protégé’s professional growth.

### **Socialization**

Socialization is routinely viewed as a process rather than a relationship, although relationships are important and necessary to the process. It is the process by which people acquire the values and attitudes, the interest, skills, and knowledge—in short the culture—current in groups to which they are, or seek to become members (Merton, Reader & Kendell, 1957; Jablin, 1987; Albrecht & Bach, 1997). The core idea of socialization is “the gradual persuasion of people to adopt desired attitudes and beliefs through social example, social pressure, and provision of positive reinforcement for ‘proper’ behavior and negative or non-reinforcement for ‘improper behavior’” (Leavitt, 1991, p. 140). Berger and Luckman (1966) found that once someone had been socialized into a particular group or situation, subsequent socialization could induct her or him into new situations, groups, or organizations. They called this “secondary socialization” and noted that people who have left supportive, known environments, those who have left the familiarity of family and friends are particularly open to secondary socialization.

More recently, Moreland and Levine (2002) examined socialization in work groups. Their findings that the process results from the group looking for a member or members who can contribute to the group goals and individuals looking for groups that contribute to the satisfaction of personal needs suggest that socialization would be particularly important in political organizations. Morrison (2002) looked at structural characteristics of newcomer’s networks and suggests that they have two types of networks—informational and friendship. The informational network, as would be expected, is used for acquiring various types of information. The friendship network helps the newcomer to feel integrated into the organization. Morrison’s findings also suggest that socialization could be extremely important to women in political organizations.

Although business, psychology, education, and sociology focus on socialization, they do so with communication and interaction secondary to their particular fields. Still, some researchers have noted the importance of communication in the socialization process. Bernstein (1972), for example, observed that “individuals come to learn their social roles through the process of communication” (p. 474). Similarly, Reichers (1987) noted that newcomers establish a situational identity and make sense of organizational events more rapidly when engaging in more symbolic interactions. Interaction frequency with insiders is important to the rate of socialization but it does not matter with whom the interaction takes place (not a mentor). Several researchers have noted that the socialization process occurs in stages (Katz, 1980; Schein, 1983; Van Maanen, 1976). Still others found that socialization, like mentoring, provides different functions. Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein & Gardner (1994) identified six functions of the socialization process: performance proficiency, people, politics, organizational values and goals, history, and language.

Obviously research suggests that there are benefits to both the individual members of an organization and to the organization itself derived from mentoring and socialization. However, little research has been done on mentoring and/or socialization in politics or political organizations. Additionally, the lack of parity in the body politic raises questions about the mentoring and socialization of women in these areas. Although women have made inroads into politics, gender parity has not been achieved in the United States. Other democracies (e.g., Norway, Ukraine, Wales) have legislated a more equitable distribution of power while the United States lags behind and relies on its citizens to distribute the balance of power. However, the “balance of power” continues to elude women in the U.S.; in our 228 year history only 215 (1.8 percent) have served in the Congress, and only two Supreme Court Justices have been female (Wilson, 2004). It is not only national government that is lacking in gender parity, local governments are also dominated by men. Wilson (2004) notes that currently women are only about 12 percent of both Governors and Mayors of the 100 largest United States cities. Clearly this begs the question “Why after all these years is the balance of power still tipped in favor of men?” An examination of mentoring and socialization of women in local politics is only a starting point; there is much work needs to be done in this area. The aim of this study was to explore mentoring and socialization of women in local politics and political organizations through the voices of women in local politics. This research takes a qualitative approach at answering some of the questions raised about women in politics. Specifically, it gives rise to the experiences of women in local politics in an effort to gain a deeper understanding. Local politics in general and women in local politics in particular have been largely overlooked. Previous research largely ignores mentoring and socialization at all levels of politics and political organizations and this study attempts to address this oversight. Specifically, it poses questions about the extent to which women are mentored in local politics and political organizations. If they are being mentored, who is doing the mentoring? Are women socialized into politics and political organizations or are they left to figure it out for themselves?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Women who ran for local office, regardless of the outcome of the campaign, are the focus of this study. A campaign for local office is defined as one that is run at the City or County level. Examples include Mayor, City Council, School Board, Sheriff, and Representative to the State Legislature. Initial contact was made by a former campaign volunteer with a woman who had made a run for Mayor; the former candidate was told basics about the research and was asked if she would be interested in participating. She graciously accepted the invitation and scheduled an interview at her home. Her political career began by stuffing envelopes for someone running for office. She got involved in the local Democratic Party and someone asked her to run for County Commission, which she won. After two terms on the commission she decided to run for Mayor, at the time

she was in her late 40s. No woman had ever been elected as Mayor in the city and of those who ran, nobody even came close. She came close, but lost to a candidate with better financial support.

Four of the participants were friends or acquaintances of the Mayoral candidate and, per her advice, I used her name to get me in the door. One was a former School Board member in her late 40s who ran for office because the county continued to be segregated and she wanted to change it. She served one term and lost her bid for reelection. Another was a former City Council member in her late 50s who had served two terms on a council of all men. She decided to run for office because she was tired of the way things were being handled. A third was currently a County Commissioner in her late 50s to early 60s who had served for years. The last was a former County Commissioner who at 79 still has her finger on the pulse of politics in the city. She was very active in the local Republican Party and someone convinced her she should run for office. She did, she won, and served for 30 years. My research interested her and she called a friend of hers who was in a School Board race at the time of the interview and gave her my number. This resulted in a sixth interview in the Southeast. This candidate was new to campaigning, but not to politics. Although her children are one and three and a long way from going to school, she thought she could help to change and improve the current school system before they get there.

I also contacted women in the Northeast to get another perspective and to explore the experiences of women in a different region. I was curious to find out if women in general have similar experiences or if experiences are particular to specific geographic areas. The participants included the President of City Council, in her early 50s who had been involved in politics for most of her adult life. She and her husband are ward bosses and she ran for office because they needed a candidate. The second Northerner was a State Representative in her mid to late 40s. She has also been involved in politics most of her adult life and got into it by working for other elected officials. I also interviewed the Mayor of a small borough in her late 60s, who has been Mayor purely by accident. On Election Day when she went to the polls someone handed her a button and told her to “make sure you vote for that candidate.” She looked to see who she was voting for and saw her name on the button. Baffled, she said to the poll worker “You have got to be kidding. I’m not running for Mayor.” She was told that they really needed her and she won the office without campaigning.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted at various locations based on the participants’ preferences: three interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes, four others at their workplace, and two in restaurants. Prior to the interview, many of the participants asked how long it would take. I told them it could be as long or as short as they wanted it to be, and they ranged from one hour

to three hours. Only one participant told me she would give me a specific amount of time. In an effort to create a comfortable, non-threatening environment I told the women basic information about myself and promised to tell them more after the interview. Apparently my technique worked because they relaxed and forgot about the tape recorder sitting on the table. In fact, in two of the interviews the participants stated that they did not know why they were telling me things they had not told anyone else, one woman told me certain things were not for publication, and another got up in the middle of the interview and closed her office door.

The interviewing methods were similar to those suggested by McCracken (1988) to allow the participant to tell her own story. I began each of the interviews by asking the participant to "Tell me a little bit about yourself" and asked as few questions as possible based on the participants' responses. I encouraged them to talk freely about their experiences, their backgrounds, what had initially gotten them involved in local politics, and any other area they felt was important in understanding the experiences of women in local politics by nodding affirmatively and keeping quiet. Most of the women eventually got to the information I was interested in, but for the few that did not, I asked more specific questions such as "Tell me about getting involved, was there anyone who helped you?" After most of the interviews participants told me to call if I had any more questions, wanted to set up another interview, or needed clarification.

### Data Analysis

The first step in data analysis was transcription, which I did myself as a means of living with the data and becoming more familiar with it. My analysis of the data followed the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967). I reviewed the transcripts for anything that might give me some insight into mentoring relationships and socialization of women in local politics. In this analysis these were the only concepts I was interested in, and I analyzed the data with this in mind. I examined the transcripts for themes as they related to these two concepts, looking for both similarities and differences between the women's experiences based on such things as region, age, and political party affiliation.

### Findings

It became clear from the interviews that very little mentoring was being done among women in local politics. In fact, it seems as if a small group of women who have run for office work together to help the next woman get elected. More accurately there are two groups of women working to get other women elected: Democrats and Republicans, and each do it differently. Most of the mentoring taking place among these women is not mentoring in the traditional sense of an older, wiser person taking the younger, naïve newcomer under her wing; instead, it is peer mentoring (Kram, 1980; Kram & Isabella, 1985). In fact, there is evidence that the three kinds of peer relationships suggested by Kram and Isabella (1985) occur

among these women and these are intertwined with the themes of floundering, emotional support, and advice found in the women's stories.

### Mentoring or Lack Thereof

A common theme for these women was a sense of not knowing what to do or how to do it. Many of them were asked to run or decided to run with very little knowledge of what the office was or about how politics really worked. In fact, most of them thought that they could not win. At the early stage of a career Kram and Isabella (1985) define an information peer as someone who helps the newcomer to learn the ropes and/or tells her how to get the job done. There is little evidence in these women's stories that information peers existed at this stage of their careers. Instead, there are tales of not knowing what to do and having to find out for themselves as evidenced by a woman running for School Board: "What I didn't know, and no one told me, is that the way people play the political game, controlling air time, so most of the callers were supporters of my opponent" (Candidate 6).

Another woman who had been involved in community organizations and in the PTA and had worked for non-profit organizations such as the *United Farm Workers of America* and *America's Promise*, "used to joke with a friend that I would run for Mayor one day." But she had never been that involved in political campaigns.

I helped a State Senator stuff envelopes, you know a few things like that, and I hadn't really been behind the scenes in a campaign, though I was very politically aware. And so when this guy encouraged me to run for office I really thought that I wasn't qualified. I mean, I didn't know how, what a county commissioner did (Candidate 1).

Another woman described being left to figure it out for herself and blamed it on a lack of "*camaraderie among women. We are not good coalition builders*" (Candidate 8).

The experience was very different for women who were actually mentored in the traditional sense.

*She met with me and another woman who was thinking about running in a different district. She had us over for lunch and it was totally just a mentoring type thing. That was just really helpful. It was really helpful because she's a Republican and I used her name whenever possible to show that I have bipartisan support basically.* (Candidate 6)

One long time office holder made it a point to talk to women throughout her career and beyond. She is in some senses the matriarch of the Southeastern women.

Basically any woman that wanted to run, I talked to them and I still do. Blank, when I first talked to her I would never have picked her out to be a winner. She had the qualities she needed but she also had two little kids and I don't see how you're gonna manage

that. But I wasn't going to discourage her. (Candidate 4)

Not only was she willing to talk to other women, but she seemed to take pride in the women that she helped regardless of the outcome: "I frequently work with other women. They come to me when they first run a campaign to find out what they should do. I have five out there. I have worked with a lot of women. I've worked with a lot that lost too" (Candidate 4). Other descriptions of the relationship include "Willing to share her war stories" (Candidate 3) and having "lunch several times to talk about my campaign and strategize" (Candidate 6). In addition to the theme of mentoring in the traditional sense and peer mentoring to socialize women into the political arena, women also told about getting and giving advice.

#### *Advice*

Women who had never run for office before or been involved in politics before looked to others for advice. One would expect that advice given would include how to do what, when and some of it did. In fact, the only man mentioned in relation to mentoring was "very helpful. He had always run a very intense neighborhood campaign and he told me how to do it" (Candidate 1). Candidate 1, who had been in the most levels of local politics, told women at a dinner the importance of not only getting ready once they decided to run, but also the importance of being ready to run: "*The important thing is to be prepared. So if you think you wanna run or if you know women that you want to run in the future, start getting that stuff organized now because when you decide, unless you decide a year ahead, a lot of times it's about preparedness meeting opportunity.*"

Interestingly, much of the advice the women talked about was about their appearance. This is the area where collegial relationships were most notable; it is here where friendships are important because they allow the women to be totally candid with one another. They were told about details such as what to wear, what makeup was necessary, and how to fix their hair. When Candidate One decided to run for a higher office and she was spending more time in front of the cameras, her friend who had also been elected to office previously told her that she was going to have to look the part of a Mayor. The discussion went back and forth between wearing suits, getting a professional looking haircut and more.

You're gonna have to wear makeup." And she said, "Well, I wear makeup." And I said, "Nobody can tell." And I said "you're gonna have to wear lipstick." And I was sitting at her dining room table with no lipstick on and she left to go get some water or something and I said "okay now, we're gonna try an experiment. You know what I look like right?" and she said yeah. So I put on my lipstick and she came back into the room and I said "Okay, tell me what you think." And she said, "Alright, I'll wear lipstick." (Candidate 2)

Candidate Two knew what she was talking about; she had similar advice given her when she ran for office. "I had a friend who is very skilled in um media relationships and she would give me advice on things like image. For example, I usually wear a bunch of silver bracelets and she would say "you can't do that." Although there was some traditional mentoring and some peer mentoring going on in these women's political lives, those things did not seem to be enough to keep them in politics. The most important benefit they got from their relationships was in the form of emotional support.

#### **Emotional Support**

Several of the women talked about a woman or other women who supported them emotionally. One called it a "*Good old girls' network*" (Candidate 6). She clarified this by explaining it was not like the "good ol'boys network" that kept women out, but rather a way to put everyone on equal footing.

I think that a lot of women that have held office, not as many as the men, but a lot of women who have held office in the county, they are helping other women to do it now that they're not or they're not right now. They've gone out of their way to be really supportive. I feel like I can talk to them and trust them to know what to know.

One woman got a phone call from a friend describing an interaction with one of the guys. She told how he called her "Honey" in the workplace and how it was something that had always been overlooked and how finally she had the courage to look straight at him and "*She said 'You gave me the courage to say I am the bureau manager, I'm not your honey.'* So I think in that way women are helping one another" (Candidate 8).

Candidate One recalled being in the process of deciding and calling for advice and trying everything she could to talk herself out of running.

A dear lady who was a Democrat, an activist, who'd been a labor organizer in the old days, she was 83 years old and I called and I said "They're trying to, they're encouraging me to run." And she goes, "Well, I think you oughta do it, we need a lady in there. It's time that we make changes." I said, "Well, I'm not from here." She goes, "Well that's okay, you've been active in the community." I said "I'm divorced with two kids." "Oh," she said, "a lot of people are divorced these days, that's no problem." I said "Well, I come from a labor background." She goes, "Well you tell 'em you're for the working person." And so you know, and a lot of that district is very working-class. And so every excuse that I had, "You know the people can't pronounce my name," you know, every excuse I had she had come back for. And she goes I think you oughta do it. So, we decided to do it.

Candidate Six talked about building a relationship with another woman who had said she could not help her because she was

supporting another candidate during the Primary. She talked of how nice the woman was, but that she could not support her due to a conflict of interest. However, when the candidate she was supporting lost in the Primary

She contacted me, she's been really, really helpful. Someone I can contact late at night and complain or cry or whatever about. She's been real helpful just in terms of that personal support, but also she was on school board. She's having a fundraiser for me and she helped me organize a letter that was signed by Blank and the current and past Democratic chair.

Perhaps the best explanation of the relationship women have to other women in politics is best summed up by Candidate Seven.

I think there are still few enough women in government, as elected officials, that when you find someone, every woman has an obligation when you get to a certain spot to turn around and look who's back there and reach out your hand and bring her along. And show her how to do that. That's something that I think women could mentor one another a lot more and I find in government that women are willing to do that. I try to do that whenever I can. I love my internship program.

### **Implications**

This study suggests that there are important differences in the kinds of mentoring men and women engage in. Although women have various supportive relationships among women running for local office, they are not mentoring in the traditional sense. Many of the relationships that women in local politics have closely parallel the peer relationships outlined by Kram and Isabella (1985). These relationships are good, supportive relationships; they help women to feel better about running for office and give women more confidence once they are elected. Women involved in these kinds of relationships help each other depending on who is running for what office at any given time.

Women do not support other women's careers for the long haul, nor do they necessarily take other women under their wing. Obviously, based on the benefits to parties involved in mentoring, mentoring is important. There is something to be said for an experienced person taking an interest in a newcomer and devoting time and energy to shaping that person. In addition to a lack of traditional mentoring, women are not being socialized very well into politics or political organizations. They stuff envelopes, put up yard signs, and make phone calls, but many have no sense of what politics is all about. When they decide to run for office they are often left to figure things out for themselves, which causes problems during the campaign and beyond. This lack of mentoring and socialization could partly explain the lack of female candidates at higher political levels.

### **Future Research**

This research suggests a number of questions that need further exploration. It would be interesting to look at the relationship of this core group of Southern women as new women enter into politics in the County. Will they embrace newcomers? Will more women be inclined to mentor other women knowing what they learned from experience about the challenges faced by newcomers? A better understanding of the benefits of mentoring and socialization to women in local politics needs to be developed in order to encourage more of these relationships. It is entirely possible that women do not recognize the need for mentoring and socialization and therefore do not engage in these practices.

It would also be interesting to explore women's backgrounds for similarities and differences that compel them to run for office with little or no knowledge of the office or politics in general. For example, are women with children more inclined to get involved locally because they can see firsthand the effects of policy on their children? Is level of education an issue for women who want to run for office? Do women run because of issues with local government?

Interview data suggests regional differences, but it is inconclusive at best. It would be interesting to collect additional data regionally to make a better comparison. Other regions, such as the Southwest or Midwest, might garner additional themes of mentoring and socialization. The data also suggests differences between parties, but it is inconclusive because several of the candidates ran for nonpartisan seats. Additional data, which distinguishes the women by party affiliations, might be helpful.

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