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2022

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## Undoing the Dyad: Re-examining Mentorship with a Feminist Lens

### Publication Statement

Originally published as:

Wallace, B., Dewitt, M., & Trucks, E. (Forthcoming) Undoing the Dyad: Re-examining Mentorship with a Feminist Lens. In L. Rod-Welch & B. Weeg (Eds.), *Academic Library Mentoring: Fostering Growth and Renewal*. USA: ACRL.

# Undoing the Dyad:

## Re-examining Mentorship with a Feminist Lens

*Bailey Wallace, Melissa DeWitt, and Elia Trucks*

Academic libraries consistently use mentoring programs to integrate new employees by sharing organizational knowledge and providing support to advance in their careers. Traditional models of mentorship are tools that help support existing power structures and keep in power those benefiting from the associated privilege. One way to interrogate traditional mentorship models and their inherent inequities is to apply a feminist lens in examining the expectations and actions of mentors and mentees. This chapter discusses how the traditional dyad mentoring model does not support everyone equally and explores alternative, inclusive models of mentorship, such as group mentoring and peer mentoring. We will connect historical context and theoretical models of mentorship with our own experiences through a feminist lens. Our goal is to highlight models that acknowledge the psychosocial aspect of mentorship, celebrate diverse identities and experiences, and seek to balance power structures.

The most common type of mentorship used in academic libraries today is a dyad mentorship model. Dyad models have many limitations, especially for individuals with marginalized identities. Dyadic models are characterized by formal structures, where information flows from a more experienced mentor who has been entrenched in the institution or profession to a junior employee who receives the wisdom and assimilates into the institution.<sup>1</sup> However, assimilation into these institutions, such as academic libraries or higher education institutions, that were built by upper-class, white, cisgender men, replicates the

prejudice and biases that sustain the systemic inequities that plague our society. Mentorship models that seek to assimilate newer workers into the existing power structures further establish oppressive systems that are exemplified by patriarchy, racism, and homophobia.<sup>2</sup> Librarians who are part of marginalized groups have different experiences with mentorship than librarians who are part of the dominant culture. Traditional mentorship can perpetuate feelings of alienation, resulting in librarians leaving the profession or assimilating into the dominant oppressive systems.

Mentorship models built upon feminist values can improve the relationships that come from mentorship and destabilize power structures. Feminism is a movement that values equality of the sexes and seeks to end gender-based oppression. Equality, equity, interdependence, valuing lived experiences, and the ethic of care are important concepts that align with feminist principles; library workers can apply these principles to make more inclusive mentorship models. From academic and public libraries<sup>3</sup> to professional organizations like ACRL,<sup>4</sup> library organizations state that they value diversity and inclusion but continue to use the same inequitable models. In order for libraries to fully reach their stated ideals of equity and inclusion, all practices, including mentorship, must be interrogated to determine how they support systems of inequity.

The authors are white, cisgender, middle-class women who work in academic libraries in Denver, Colorado. We are all still learning about feminism and working toward incorporating feminist principles in our practices. We acknowledge our privilege in writing about this topic in a profession that values the experiences and words of white women. Our hope is to recognize the oppressive practices surrounding mentorship in our profession and identify new ways of moving forward to support our colleagues and communities who face challenges we do not experience.

## The Traditional Eurocentric Approach: The History of Mentorship

In order to provide context to current mentorship practices, we can look to ancient Greece; their practices created the inequitable systems which are the foundation for modern mentorship in academic libraries. The word *mentor* originated from Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of the story, Homer presented a traditional dyad mentorship relationship wherein Mentor, the experienced member of the family, gave advice to the young protege,

Odysseus' son, Telemachus.<sup>6</sup> These characters actively kept the patriarchal power system in place by preparing Telemachus to take over his father's role and pass power to his eventual son. This is the most influential recorded description of mentorship, but by no means did Homer create this concept.

While Homer gave a name to mentorship, the practice of keeping power within the dominant class is endemic in ancient Greek culture. In the eighth century BCE, Greece moved toward a democratic form of government that "allowed everyone, regardless of background and wealth, to participate actively... indeed, of a form of government which made it everyone's duty to do so."<sup>7</sup> However, "everyone" is a misnomer, as during this time women, children, resident aliens, and enslaved people did not have the right to vote, hold office, or participate in this government.<sup>8</sup> While Greece developed this "radical" form of government, where the people hold power, the limitations on citizenship deliberately reinforced the patriarchal value of men, which is then replicated in the system of mentorship.

From ancient Greece onward, the purpose of mentorship has remained the same, which is to maintain existing power structures, but the way that people engage with mentorship has changed. Colley analyzed the history of mentorship through feminist and Marxist lenses and describes four stages defined by the context and the goals of the time. They illustrated that mentorship as a practice has "shifted from dominant [groups] reproducing their own power, to subordinate [groups] reproducing their own oppression."<sup>9</sup> In the first two stages, "mentoring appears to continue to operate as an activity carried out by the powerful on behalf of the powerful... This works not just in favour of certain class interests, but also of white males, against the interests of oppressed groups such as women and ethnic minorities."<sup>10</sup> For example, the purpose of Mentor's guidance is to teach Telemachus how to maintain control of Ithaca. The focus of mentoring relationships shifted in the third stage, as mentorship became prominent in programs that worked with disenfranchised groups. During this time, program goals included improving impoverished groups by connecting them with upper- and middle-class role models who were considered moral by virtue of their class and position.<sup>11</sup> Mentorship then shifted focus from transferring power intra-class to dominating another class in order to preserve power.<sup>12</sup> This led to the modern stage that "trend[s] towards the weak mentoring the weak."<sup>13</sup> The powerful ruling class no longer had to use mentorship to sustain their own power because the laboring class could reinforce the status quo. Mentoring resources became scarce, leading to untrained, ill-equipped, and over-exerted volunteers. These mentors focused on assimilating disenfranchised groups "into society as it exists, rather

than equipping them with a critical understanding of society or of any means by which they themselves might seek to change it.”<sup>14</sup>

Dyadic mentorship models were used throughout history as a tool for people in power to stay in power. These models assimilated new generations into harmful institutions that upheld patriarchal ideals about how society should operate. As Colley has shown, the models shift slightly but the fundamental priority remains: keep white, cisgender men in power and others subjugated below them. Libraries are not an exception to this history. By exploring these problems through a feminist lens, we can illuminate new possibilities that subvert these power structures.

## Jackknives and Dolls: An Overview of Feminism

Feminism is often thought of as the movement to free women from male-dominated oppression and gain equality for the sexes. This is true to an extent, but it is an overly simplistic view of myriad feminist theories, including Black feminism; womanism; and first-, second-, and third-wave feminism. For example, hooks describes feminism as the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression;<sup>15</sup> and Ferguson describes feminist thinking as “in general, feminist theory pursues ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ thinking; focuses on becomings rather than beings; and works to change, as well as to understand, the world.”<sup>16</sup> One commonality of these many understandings of feminism is that they deal with the power imbalances that exist based on gender. In addition, some of these movements push back on the intersections of oppression based on additional marginalized identities such as race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Exploring these power dynamics, as well as other concepts central to feminist theory, like the ethic of care and the value of lived experiences, can bring complexity and nuance to mentorship.

The concept of “power”—who has it, who is trying to obtain it, who is hurt by it, and the artificial scarcity of it—is ingrained in the history of feminism movements. Power is “the ability to act; the ability to influence people, institutions or processes... the ability to produce an effect.”<sup>17</sup> Yoder and Kahn discuss two ways that feminists have conceptualized power: “power-over (domination)” and “power-to (personal empowerment).”<sup>18</sup> Power-over is a commonly explored dynamic, especially when discussing how women have been oppressed through social, economic, and sexual inequalities of power. Power-to and empowerment

are the amount of control one feels over their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Every relationship has power imbalances, but problems arise when people use their power to hurt other people. Feminist literature often focuses on the power cisgender men have over cisgender women, but there are other identities that face power imbalances based on race, sexual identity, gender identity, class, and ability. As we will discuss later, power plays a major role in dyad mentoring relationships; power imbalances can create harmful environments for participants.

Some feminist literature prioritizes relationships and care. The ethics of care theory “implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life.”<sup>19</sup> Care ethics focus on the people within networks and how they care for and relate to one another. This ethic can be seen in practice or virtue, and by maintaining relationships, we can meet the needs of ourselves and others.<sup>20</sup> This is not a solely feminist practice, but due to the traditional gender roles of women as homemakers, mothers, and other caretakers, the ethic of care resonates with many women. These expectations translate into female-dominated professions like nursing, social work, and paralegal work, where the work is relational, care-oriented, and often invisible. If we prioritize care in relationships within our work, then developing relationships and building interdependence follow. Higgins writes, “Interdependence could be a way to revalue our relationships and responsibilities both to our communities as well as to and within our institutions.”<sup>21</sup> Mentoring relationships that include deeper care and reliance on each other are fundamental aspects of psychosocial support.

Another aspect of feminism is valuing lived experiences and constructed knowledge. Traditional scientific literature values objectivity, if that can exist, and removing the researcher from the topic; feminist research values subjectivity and recognizing how one’s lived experiences are essential to understanding. These concepts are not new to librarianship. Hannigan and Crew, when writing about bringing feminist scholarship to librarianship research said, “All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known.”<sup>22</sup> Narrative is an essential aspect for creating knowledge and understanding the experiences of people who are silenced or marginalized. “Women who inhabit particular identity categories, such as transgender, working-class, or African-American, as well as women who have been subject to certain victimizations, such as rape or trafficking, tell their stories in order to challenge the dominant gender, class, or racial imaginaries and to contest the dominant narratives. These stories become the ground for analysis as well as for calls for respect and justice.”<sup>23</sup> Appreciating these differences in experiences is vital for caring for the whole person. This is opposed to patriarchal expectations of assimilation, where people must fit into the “norm” of being a white cisgender male. If they don’t fit into these categories,

they are “othered” and must change. By assimilating to the norm, they cannot tell their stories that do not fit into the prevailing narratives pushed by the dominant culture. Feminist scholarship prioritizes these varied narratives and the wealth of knowledge that would otherwise be ignored.

## Feminism and Librarianship

Librarianship is known as a “pink collar” profession, which is a profession that is care- or relationship-oriented and often thought of as “women’s work.”<sup>24</sup> Pink collar professions are predominately staffed by women and were built on the labor of underpaid and undervalued women.<sup>25</sup> Melville Dewey, known colloquially as the father of libraries, was known for his misogynistic treatment of women and desire to “improve” people who were not rich white men. In a speech to the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, Dewey described “natural qualities” that made women good for library work: “accuracy, order (or what we call the housekeeping instinct), executive ability, and above all earnestness and enthusiasm.”<sup>26</sup> He went on to explain that the reason women made a lower salary was because they had poorer health and lost time from illness, they lacked business and executive training because as children they played with dolls while the boys traded jack knives, their position was temporary because they might get married, and simply because of the “consideration which she exacts and deserves on account of her sex.”<sup>27</sup> Women could be hired for smaller salaries to do the general work, while the “firm hand of authority, male-dominated boards generally thought it wiser to hire men as directors.”<sup>28</sup> Wiegand theorized that white women were allowed into the profession by the white male hegemony for a more sinister reason. In order to improve society, “good” books were chosen by rich white men in order to educate the masses.<sup>29</sup> Since these books were chosen by the “right” people, they saw no threat in allowing (“well-bred” white) women into the profession, as their authoritative choices on “good education” would not be challenged.

Considering that this is the groundwork upon which the profession was built, it is no wonder that the profession remains feminized. Shirazi describes a feminized profession as one that is “part of the larger idea of a sexual division of labor, an occupational stratification based on one’s gender presentation.”<sup>30</sup> In these professions, which include nursing, social work, and waitressing, women must emphasize the feminine qualities inherent to the work in order to overcome the transgression of working outside the home. When enough women enter the profession, it becomes seen as “women’s work” and is then devalued.<sup>31</sup>



This service mindset can be seen in academia as well, where scholars often see librarians as simple supporters for their own research rather than researchers with their own scholarly output.<sup>32</sup> Women currently make up 63.8 percent of professional staff in research libraries and their representation in leadership is relatively proportional, yet male directors have a higher average salary than female directors.<sup>33</sup>

However, this representation is misleading since not all women are included. People of color are significantly underrepresented in librarianship. According to the Association of Research Libraries statistics, only 6.9 percent of library workers are Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.4 percent are Black, 3.6 percent are Hispanic, and 0.4 percent are American Indian/Alaskan Native. Even more worrying is the fact that library leaders from these four categories only make up 11.8 percent of directors, 6.7 percent of associate directors, 14.5 percent of assistant directors, and 7.7 percent of branch library heads.<sup>34</sup> As Bourq writes, librarianship has a whiteness problem.<sup>35</sup> Libraries were developed as a place to educate the masses, which sounds good on the surface but is a tool used to assimilate people of color into a white supremacist society.<sup>36</sup> Whiteness is a construct developed in order to maintain a social hierarchy that enforces white supremacy. White supremacy, according to Lawrence and Keleher, is “[a]n historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege.”<sup>37</sup> White supremacy is supported by and, in turn, supports other systems of oppression, including sexism and misogyny, homophobia, and ableism. These systems can all be seen in librarianship and affect the way mentorship is practiced.

Even as this chapter will discuss feminism, it is vital to mention that when wielded maliciously, feminism can be harmful. White feminism focuses on raising white women up to the power level of white men, rather than trying to dismantle the structures that keep current systems of inequity in place. Young describes white feminism as “a set of beliefs that allows for the exclusion of issues that specifically affect women of colour. It is ‘one-size-fits-all’ feminism, where middle-class white women are the mould that others must fit.”<sup>38</sup> By focusing on the needs of white women and excluding all other women, this kind of feminism is actively harmful and violent toward women of color. Feminism that does not consider the intersectional lens of oppression, as described by Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>39</sup> is not progressive or forward-thinking. For example, Yousefi discusses the gossip networks that women of color create to survive within white supremacist systems.<sup>40</sup> These networks and survival tactics are vital for people from groups who have been silenced. People designing mentoring programs or entering

mentoring relationships must consider how the matrices of oppression impact experiences and must use an inclusive lens to support people.

Feminism is multifaceted and it has as many different faces as the people who believe in it. We use the concepts of power, ethic of care, interdependence, and valuing lived experiences as the basis for our analysis of mentorship. While libraries are female-dominated, feminist principles are not always aligned with the core values of the profession. Library workers entering into mentoring relationships can consider these feminist concepts to better support current and future library workers.

## Neither Disrupting nor Overcoming: Problems with Mentorship

On the surface, dyad mentorship models offer benefits to both mentor and mentee. Acquiring guidance from a mentor can help a mentee or junior employee avoid personal, professional, and social pitfalls; lessen anxiety; boost courage; and provide promotional opportunities. A mentor can benefit by getting a sense of fulfillment and purpose by paying it forward or by gaining new perspectives by working with a junior employee. We originally developed an interest in mentorship because these benefits prompted a need to offer more mentorship opportunities.

We are currently the leaders of the Colorado Association of Libraries' (CAL) New Professionals Interest Group that focuses on providing informal and formal events for new professionals and those transitioning from one job to another or shifting careers. In 2019, we hosted a workshop with a speed mentoring activity. We tried this activity after we received informal feedback from early career and transitioning librarians suggesting that they wanted a mentor, but they struggled to find and connect with one. Many of the mentors we met during the workshop also expressed grievances with mentorship programs in which they had participated. Hearing challenges expressed from both sides sparked our curiosity about mentorship practices and led to our exploration of the research about alternative mentorship relationships.

We begin by recognizing that there are dyad models where participants can find value in the experiences they have and relationships they create. The ACRL Dr. E. J. Josey Spectrum Scholar Mentor Program (Spectrum Mentor Program) is a traditional mentorship program to support early-career librarians of color.<sup>41</sup> The goal of the Spectrum Mentor Program is to recruit library students from

underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds, provide them with resources to navigate their graduate program, and support the transition to being a working professional.<sup>42</sup> This program illustrates a well-structured dyadic mentorship model with strong guidelines, training, and communication.

Author Bailey Wallace participated in a traditional dyad mentorship program through the Colorado Academic Library Association (CoALA), a division of CAL. The program creators provided extensive training and support for the participants. Mentees chose their own mentors in the program, which made the matching process collaborative and attentive to the mentee's needs. However, unless mentorship programs deliberately subvert dominant narratives, they will still perpetuate practices that support oppressive structures. As Hinsdale states, "[B]ecause it is borne from, and woven into the fabric of, a time-honored Eurocentric academic approach to training and guiding protégés, traditional mentoring is capable of neither disrupting dominant academic norms nor overcoming structures that limit relational possibilities."<sup>43</sup> Creating mentorship relationships that are outside the traditional Eurocentric format offers more opportunity to incorporate feminist values and inclusive practices.

## Difficulties with Dyads

As we reviewed the literature and considered our own lived experiences, we found three common areas that address the problems with dyad mentorships: mentor program structure, relationship-building, and power imbalances. Traditional dyad programs can have a lack of structure or instructions that can lead to ineffective relationships. Structure includes program design, relationship guidance, instructions or guidelines, and methods of matching pairs. For example, in our graduate program, incoming students were matched with professionals throughout the library field. However, little to no guidance was given to structure the relationship; the program did not meet the needs of the mentor or mentees, and many relationships fizzled out.

Programs without clear structure might match incompatible people, which can potentially cause harm. For example, Martinez-Cola described their experience with white mentors as a student and eventually as a faculty of color. They described three categories of white mentors: Collectors, Nightlights, and Allies, showing the variety of ways white people can either support or hinder people who face marginalization.<sup>44</sup> While they do not discuss formal pairings, programs that do not consider lived experiences or compatibility can create harmful relationships. For example, Jackson studied the perceptions of six young Black men

who participated in a group mentorship program that paired them with older Black men. The author found that “all of the participants agreed that working with a Black man, as a mentor was central to how they experienced and grew in the program. One of the reasons was because of a connection to shared experience.”<sup>45</sup> Participants found their mentor to be more trustworthy; since they were of the same race and gender, they better understood what the mentee had experienced and could give advice and guidance based on that shared experience. Considering that the relationships that develop from these dyads should be the foundation for mentorship, incompatible pairs make the process useless at best and damaging at worst.

Another problem with traditional mentorship structures is the singular focus on junior and inexperienced workers, and lack of support for mid-career, transitioning, or experienced professionals.<sup>46</sup> Many of these professionals would benefit from mentorship if it were offered, as it would provide them a space to learn about a new culture, prepare to transition into a role with more responsibility, or create new relationships with people who understand the work they are doing. However, in these models there appears to be an invisible line—whether that is promotion, five or more years of experience, or other time-related barriers—that professionals eventually cross, moving them from the mentee to the mentor role. They are expected to pick up that mantle and successfully mentor with little to no training. Lack of mentor training reinforces Colley’s argument about the weak mentoring the weak, where this format of mentorship shifts the burden onto lower classes and the existing power dynamics are reinforced without effort from those who profit from the status quo. Mentorship program creators must be aware of these structural pitfalls to best meet the needs of their participants. The success of the program is not entirely on the shoulders of the creators, as mentee and mentor must strive to build a working relationship, which leads to a different set of problems.

The second major problem area involves relationship-building between participants. The feminist value of the ethic of care prioritizes relationships, which should be the most important consideration in mentoring programs. Traditional dyad mentorship requires two people to enter into a relationship and make commitments to keep that relationship working. Benishek et al. discuss how mentors and mentees might have unrealistic, simplistic, or glorified ideas and expectations of mentorship that don’t prepare either party to face challenges that come with entering a mentoring relationship.<sup>47</sup> We encountered this problem when we held the speed mentoring activity. While we were asked to offer more mentorship opportunities, planning a mentoring activity was complicated because finding the “right” mentor or mentee is a difficulty that we have

personally experienced. Both parties wanted to find a natural fit and were thus constantly disappointed when they attempted to enter a mentorship relationship only to have it not meet their expectations. Forced participation in a mentorship program, like in graduate programs, on-boarding, or professional development, can lack sufficient preparation for either mentee or mentor to build a beneficial relationship. Another problem with forming dyad relationships is that the workload might be unfairly placed on mentor or mentee. This will lead to a strained relationship as it might cause burnout or feelings of resentment.<sup>48</sup>

These problems can be addressed and corrected to offer better mentoring programs, but there will always be a major fault with dyad programs that cannot be fixed: power imbalances. Feminist analysis illustrates the concept of power-over or domination that is seen in traditional dyad mentorships. These programs create a potentially harmful environment as mentors, even ones with good intentions, will have power-over mentees because “[w]ithin the pair, there is an understood hierarchy in which the mentor occupies the more powerful position.”<sup>49</sup> While power imbalances are not inherently bad, they can be exploited to benefit one person at the expense of the other. These hierarchies are often unquestioned or unrecognized and contribute to power structures that uphold patriarchal values.

These one-to-one mentoring programs do not address power imbalances, do devalue relational labor, and do prioritize assimilation. Benishek et al. discuss how “historically, professionals have tended to implement a Procrustean (i.e., one size fits all) model of mentoring, assuming that traditional models of mentoring can be used to facilitate the growth of all people.”<sup>50</sup> This model creates exclusive mentorship programs that lack support for librarians who have been marginalized by the dominant culture. Mentees are assimilated into current cultures at institutions, thereby maintaining the exclusionary systems that benefit ruling ideologies. Traditional dyad mentoring relationships aim to support a mentee in acquiring skills that will make them more employable or tenure-worthy, without focusing on the whole individual. The lived experiences and the narratives that people express are devalued, as the purpose of this mentorship focuses solely on their employability. Since the goal of feminism is to end gender-based oppression, this model of labor, and subsequently mentorship, actively undermines the feminist movement.

The focus of prioritizing employability and assimilation over the needs and well-being of employees devalues the relational labor that people put into mentoring relationships, making it invisible. Mentorship is not valued by institutions as highly as other service obligations, but it is critical for supporting the profession. Promotions and raises are not predicated upon mentoring success, and they may

not be recognized in annual reviews or other formal evaluations.<sup>51</sup> Despite this erasure, mentoring relationships, whether formal or informal, still thrive because the work is necessary. As Curran et al. note,

Learning to value care work requires substantive change on the part of universities. We know that mentoring can support other women, people of color, and first generation college students in academia. Explicitly engaging in, highlighting, and valuing mentoring is a way to challenge the myth of the brilliant individual scholar who rises above the rest through their (his) innate superiority.<sup>52</sup>

Feminist forms of mentorship name and value invisible mentorship. Recognizing invisible labor is a feminist value because women's labor, including the care work that women have traditionally been expected to perform, has been devalued. This work, including care work and mentorship, should not remain invisible; providing promotions and increased opportunities for mentorship is one step toward dismantling the devaluation of relational labor at our institutions.

Applying feminist values highlights the problems with traditional dyad models that have no easy solution because the problems are endemic to our society. There are some programs that have corrected the problems of structure and relationships, but even these programs continue to support harmful mentoring relationships within existing power structures.

## **Disrupting Dominant Norms: Alternative Mentorship Models**

After recognizing the problems that exist with current dyad models, we researched other models that could support our growth and development more holistically. These alternative models—which are not new but are not as prevalent within higher education or libraries as traditional dyads—offer the potential for overcoming the problems described in the previous section. It is our goal to advocate for them as better possibilities, as they align more closely with the feminist values we explored, including power-sharing, ethic of care, and interdependence. By offering explanations and examples of different models, we share benefits and drawbacks that those seeking to design more equitable mentoring programs need to consider.

## *Group Mentoring*

The concept of group mentorship entered the scholarly discourse in the late 1990s and has shown promise as a more inclusive alternative to dyad mentoring.<sup>53</sup> Group mentoring is exactly as it sounds; instead of two people coming together to form a mentor relationship, multiple people form a group to share their experiences. Mentoring “with” emphasizes support and relationship-building, rather than solving problems or reaching goals.<sup>54</sup> The focus is on building a network of support that participants can rely on when they want to discuss issues or ask for ideas.<sup>55</sup> Group mentorship can serve to counteract the pressure individuals may feel in a dyadic relationship. Power and authority are distributed among group members, and hierarchical relationships are dismantled as all members, no matter their position, become valuable contributors to the group.<sup>56</sup>

Storytelling and narrative exchange become a deeper point of emphasis, and people feel less pressured to participate or perform when sharing as a group.<sup>57</sup> Narrative, or telling one’s own story, is an important concept in feminism that reinforces one’s own experiences and provides a window for others to understand experiences unlike their own. Group collaboration can have a transformative impact as participants exchange multiple experiences and perspectives.<sup>58</sup> Storytelling can be a powerful tool for people who experience oppression to counteract dominant narratives. Group mentoring can be a way to share experiences, critically examine previously assumed attitudes, and gain new perspectives.

Groups can be formed in ways that are intentionally inclusive; individuals who have been historically left out of traditional mentorship dyads can form mentorship groups to support their unique needs in the academy.<sup>59</sup> When considering ways to form groups and to support individuals who have traditionally been excluded from mentor relationships, it is important to consider the common purpose, place, and temporality used to define the group.<sup>60</sup> For instance, at Grand Valley State University, colleagues that were at comparable stages in their careers formed a group for mentorship because they faced similar challenges and opportunities in their daily jobs.<sup>61</sup> Other groups that have found group mentorship valuable include mid-career professionals, graduate students, and Black, Indigenous, or people of color who are staff and faculty.<sup>62,63</sup> Subsequently, there are several ways that group mentoring can work.

With the varied needs and expectations from people, different models of group mentoring have emerged. Huizing identified types of group mentoring that we explore below: peer group mentoring, many-to-one mentoring, and many-to-many mentoring.<sup>64</sup> We found that peer group mentoring and many-to-many mentoring are group mentoring subsets that are most aligned with feminist



ideals. We briefly explore the concept of many-to-one mentoring, despite a lack of research and potential for unequal power distribution, because we believe there is value in having more than one mentor figure. Lines between these different models can be blurry, and elements of each can be combined depending on the needs of participants.

### *Peer Group Mentoring*

Peer mentoring includes individuals who share something in common, such as equal status, interests, or type of position.<sup>65</sup> This type of group would address the gap in mentoring literature about mid-career mentoring, as professionals with more experience would benefit from a support system and network of their peers because they might be stepping into a new role or accepting different responsibilities.<sup>66</sup> All who are included in a peer mentor group share equal power; there is not usually one person who is the facilitator or the leader of the group because leadership shifts from person to person.<sup>67</sup> This addresses the hierarchical imbalances in traditional mentoring relationships as peer group mentoring seeks to balance the dynamic with a flattened power structure. With a flat power structure, the group can focus less on transmitting knowledge from one person to another and more on co-constructing knowledge with peers who share a similarity.<sup>68</sup> While peer groups are a great method to build networks and identify personal and professional needs, Huizing noted that groups could get off track without formal facilitators or if dominant personalities monopolize conversation in the group.<sup>69</sup> Peer mentoring groups should take this drawback into consideration when forming to ensure that everyone shares an equal voice and the peer group meets its goals.

Faculty at the University of Denver Libraries developed a “group mentoring” program in 2019. We called it “group mentoring,” even though it fits more clearly into the concept of peer mentoring described above. Five interested library faculty, including author Elia Trucks, developed a task force to explore the literature about mentoring model structure and content. The task force sent out a survey to all library faculty to gauge interest in a group mentoring program and asked for feedback about how often they wanted to meet, what they wanted to talk about, and what they hoped to achieve. The librarians were overwhelmingly interested, and topics of particular interest included supervisor support, psychosocial issues, and institutional culture. The faculty agreed to use this model for a group mentorship meeting every other month. Leadership of each meeting rotates among members and there are no dedicated mentors, just participants who can attend each time. While the meetings usually start with a topic or theme,



they evolve into a conversation that fits the needs of the members that day. Over the past year, we have commiserated on problems we face, shared vulnerabilities about our jobs and ourselves, and generated ideas for addressing issues.

### *Many-to-Many Mentoring*

Many-to-many and peer mentoring are similar but are differentiated by mentor leadership roles. Peer mentoring has no formal mentor position, while many-to-many has dedicated mentors for the duration of the group.<sup>70</sup> This format has a hierarchical structure, but the power is shared among multiple mentors and allows for experienced individuals to facilitate the growth of the group.<sup>71</sup> This difference addresses Huizinga's critique of peer mentoring—namely, that a lack of leader or facilitator caused groups to fall off track. More research on many-to-many mentorship models is needed, but like other group mentoring models, the potential for a larger, supportive network is present.

New faculty at Regis University, including author Melissa DeWitt, participate in a many-to-many mentoring program. Membership is open to any ranked faculty member from throughout the university. Participants gather regularly over a three-year period to discuss teaching philosophy, university mission, challenges, and topics of interest. The new faculty members act as mentees while individuals who have longer tenure with the university act as mentors, characteristics that classify this program as many-to-many. All individuals have the opportunity to share their ideas, seek support from one another, and contribute their perspectives. The designated mentors in the group provide structure for conversation but do not inhibit free-flowing discussion. One benefit of the group is that members develop relationships and form networks. Faculty recognize one another on campus, seek each other out for more specific support outside the group, and form workplace collaborations with one another. Despite differences in discipline, the commonality of being “new” brings people together who may not have met if the new faculty group did not exist.

### *Many-to-One Mentoring*

There is not much research on the many-to-one mentoring model. One study that looked at many-to-one experiences found mentees differed in mentoring preferences,<sup>72</sup> and a case study of one person's experience with this style described successful relationships.<sup>73</sup> Despite these being the only examples we could find, many-to-one mentoring has potential when viewed through a feminist lens. Increasing an individual's access to a network of mentors and peers

can offer more opportunities to exchange ideas and gather different perspectives. This model could offset the challenges that people from underrepresented backgrounds face. As discussed earlier, librarians of color can face additional challenges with white mentors. Many-to-one mentoring can provide opportunities for participants to talk about different issues with specific people—mentees can talk about microaggressions with a mentor who shares their experiences, while mentors who have privilege in white supremacy culture can advocate for their mentees. This allows for a larger group of people to care for the mentee's various psychosocial needs.

As discussed in an earlier section, we created a many-to-one speed mentoring activity at a Colorado Association of Libraries' New Professionals Interest Group workshop in 2019. Mentees included early career professionals, library students, and transitioning professionals; mentors were mid-level professionals in different areas of librarianship, such as public, academic, and special libraries. Mentees had about ten minutes to chat with a mentor before being asked to rotate among mentors. Everyone was given a list of questions in case they needed help facilitating conversation. Mentees gathered business cards and contact information for mentors with whom they felt a connection so that they could follow up after the workshop. Additionally, everyone received the "Mentoring Map" worksheet from the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity.<sup>74</sup> The worksheet diagrams various professional or psychosocial needs and encourages users to identify the individuals or types of individuals in their lives who might fulfill these mentoring roles. Both mentors and mentees shared positive feelings about the activity. However, a criticism from one mentee was that they felt like they were bothering the mentor and hesitated to reach out after the workshop ended. We recognize the uneven distribution of workload and communication, and for future events we will facilitate a more balanced program so that neither mentors nor mentees feel unnecessary pressure to instigate and maintain the relationship.

### *Group Mentoring and Feminism*

The feminist values of equalizing power, ethic of care, and storytelling are prioritized more strongly in group mentoring than in dyad relationships. By redistributing the hierarchical power structures found in dyad relationships, those in more precarious positions no longer have their information or knowledge siloed. Instead, ideas can flow among group members who were silenced or unwelcome in traditional models, allowing the space to share counter-narratives. With the decentralized or shared leadership of group mentoring, there is no hierarchy that

mirrors societal systems of oppression. This can remove power imbalances and create inclusive environments.

The ethic of care can be a priority in group mentoring. The support systems that can develop allow participants to build relationships that meet their creative and psychosocial needs. These relationships become the foundation of trust between participants, allowing for sharing personal experiences and stories that are important to them, rather than just explaining “how to get tenure.” Group mentoring can be a flexible model based around these differing needs. Different options for building groups based on peer status, career point, or shared values allow for participants to address their specific needs. Groups can be intentionally composed of individuals with specific needs, such as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); graduate students; staff; or mid-career professionals. These commonalities can be a way to connect, and the dissimilarities between people allow for constructing shared knowledge and sharing stories.

These elements make group mentoring a more inclusive and appealing model. However, it is possible to replicate the same problems that are present in dyads in group mentoring if one is not careful and intentional about creating a shared space. Groups that silence people from marginalized backgrounds are just as harmful as dyads with exploited power that do not allow mentees to speak up. Participants who refuse to lean into the discomfort of talking about microaggressions just perpetuate the same painful burden of people of color having to defend their position in the academy. White feminists can use group mentoring to try and assuage their guilt in a way that is actively harmful toward people of color. Individuals who choose to use this model need to examine how their environment perpetuates systems of oppression and devalues relationships and take active steps to create a space that is feminist.

### *Other Mentorship Styles*

We researched other mentorship models but did not think styles like one-off mentoring, e-mentoring, or one-to-many group mentoring shine within a feminist lens; we want to mention them for others to pursue. One that we will mention is reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring has roots in corporate structures and is intended to transfer skills across different generations of workers. In general, younger workers are seen as more knowledgeable about new technology, while older employees can transfer knowledge about leadership and company values.<sup>75</sup> The current published literature on reverse mentoring shares some of the same problems as traditional dyads, such as power hierarchies and devaluation of relational labor. The end benefit is more productivity and profit for the

company, not care for the employee. While the literature on reverse mentoring is entrenched in neoliberalism, like academic libraries, there is potential to create reverse mentoring relationships that support groups in the profession that are typically left out of mentee roles, especially mid- and late-career professionals.

## What We Say and What We Do: A Call to Action

Yousefi asks, “What are the systems that help create and sustain the disparity between what we say and what we do in libraries? And can we disrupt these systems in ways that are both viable and generative?”<sup>76</sup> We also ask, how does mentorship sustain disparity and uphold systems of oppression? The following action items will help people think intentionally about what we say our values are, and how we perform mentorship to either stick to those values or go against them.

- Make invisible labor visible by recognizing it and rewarding it. Much of the mentorship work happening in and out of the workplace is currently expected but not always prioritized in annual reviews or tenure documents. BIPOC librarians are engaging in mentorship on a regular basis, and many experience burnout. Mentorship can be recognized in performance reviews as an important aspect of our jobs, rather than something one does simply for professional development. Beyond acknowledgment, those engaging in mentorship should be rewarded. Adding mentorship to formalized evaluations and tenure documents would recognize individuals who engage in informal and formal mentorship practices, individuals who disproportionately tend to be people of color, women, queer folks, people with disabilities, and other marginalized identities.
- Stop using formal dyad mentorships for everything and explore alternatives. We have an urgent need for librarians to stop using harmful forms of mentorship that rely on hierarchical power structures favoring those with privilege. Move toward alternate models that align with feminist values and distribute power in more equitable ways. This could be as easy as evaluating your current mentorship practice and correcting the problems mentioned above to provide a more inclusive, supportive environment for people to build relationships; it can be as challenging as creating a new mentoring program using a different model in order to meet the needs of your participants.

- Acknowledge that we are working within oppressive structures and that current mentorship models do not help subvert them. Assimilating employees into institutions that are grounded in whiteness, patriarchy, and ableism is actively harmful to people that are oppressed by these systems. We must adjust our practices and workplaces to remove barriers and visibly acknowledge problem areas. Current employees in the institution must learn about the invisible forces that maintain these systems and move toward dismantling them. Alternative forms of mentorships can be supportive places to talk about resources and discuss topics of equity and inclusion. Hiring an employee of color into an overwhelmingly white workplace without making any accommodations is coercive and injurious toward the employee. If we want to retain employees, we need to value their experiences and create a space where they can thrive.

## Conclusion

Librarians must move beyond dyad mentoring models and change how we create mentoring programs by using models that align with feminist values to be more inclusive and more supportive of all library workers. Working against entrenched systems of power is hard, and those who benefit from the status quo will push back on progress. However, if we want to create a better profession that upholds the values claimed by librarians and our organizations, we cannot do what is easy and perpetuate the traditional Eurocentric approach. Making changes to mentorship is one step toward a more equitable profession.

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