

JACA
2(1994): 87-94

Flexibility Makes the Difference in Mentoring Women for Academic Success

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MY mentor invited me to write a textbook on broadcast programming," said a professor, now at the top of her field, in a focus group study. It was a follow-on to a quantitative survey I had done on women in broadcast academe. I was attempting to learn the significance of mentoring—especially mentoring styles—for women's success in achieving tenure and promotion.

"I knew nothing about the subject [of radio and television] programming," she went on to say. "My mentor took a chance on me."

From the survey she had completed, which had been analyzed and coded by three graduate students, I had categorized her as a "*constructivist*,"¹ using the definition by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986). Her way of "knowing things" was to combine experience and objective learning. She perceived herself as a creator of knowledge, able to "jump outside" frames and systems authorities provide and create her own frame (p. 134). This is the highest way of knowing, according to the hierarchy defined by Belenky, et al. (p. 15). My research showed her to be a woman likely to succeed at whatever goal she chose, achieving success where others had failed, especially in academe.

I defined a research direction—to discover the requirements for a female academic to gain tenure and promotion (academic success)—because of my own experience with trying to gain tenure at what was supposed to be the tail end of the "tenure crunch"—or, more academics applying for too few slots, which had resulted in fewer women in tenured positions by 1990 than in the 1930s (Vandell and Fishbein, 1989). Research suggested the decline in the retention of women in academe resulted from an inadequate tenuring system, and the persistence of gender discrimination in allocating resources and evaluating work (p. 3).

Part of the problem was that women do not fit the traditional, ideal perception of the role model for a tenured professor as male, "a collegiate Mr. Chips and the Dr. Einsteins, tempered by Kingman Brewster types" (Pearson, 1986, p. 3). Women who did make it through the academic maze to achieve tenure and promotion often were thought to have become "academic males." When they failed it was because they were unassertive, submissive, lacking in motivation, in confidence, aspiration, and leadership. They did too much for too little gain (p. 13).

For whatever reason, women such as I, when we entered academe, encountered what has been described as a "chilly climate" (Sandler, 1993). The entrance is especially difficult when it is from a career in broadcasting, which differs widely in expectations from academe. I went from working with radio and television news directors and programmers in designing and assessing research, helping them to apply findings in ways that would influence the bottom line, to having to design, carry out and write up, theory-based research and somehow get it published. At the same time, I was assigned a full teaching agenda, and administration of a student-managed and operated cable station.

Despite challenges, some women successfully negotiate the academic maze and achieve tenure and promotions. The differences between these women and those less successful have been attributed to mentoring (Pearson and Trent, 1985). Most women who have been successful in higher education have had at least one mentor (p. 6).

Even when their expectations, interests, teaching and research goals mirror their male colleagues, tenure-track women often misread the rules of academic life, or simply misunderstand what is expected of them (Stonewater, Evesiage and Dingerson, 1990, p. 76). Furthermore, even when successful, women continuously struggle to balance academic life with their personal lives — especially their roles as primary care givers in families (Hensel, 1991, p. 45; Gilbert and Rossman, 1992, p. 223).

MENTORING: THE KEY TO SUCCESS

The successful tenured female college faculty member in communications, at some point in her career, has been helped by a mentor, usually male (Pearson and Trent, 1985). Mentoring is vital for both men and women for faculty success, but women are restricted in forming mentoring relationships (Hill, Bahniuk and Dobos, 1989). Assuming the key to success for a woman in academe is to simply find a male mentor is hazardous. First, sexual assumptions are bound to occur in any cross-gender relationship (Gilbert and Rossman, 1992, p. 233). Secondly, men and women converse in different language patterns, which can function at cross purposes (Tannen, 1990). And third, men do not share women's primary concerns with family care-giving, which can be toward aging parents as well as children (Gilbert and Rossman, 1992, p. 233). A woman sees herself in a world of connections and encounters problems in identifying goals that may imply she is uncaring of others (Gilligan, p. 53). Although same-sex mentoring would be helpful to them, few women are in an academically-successful positions to help other women. And women are less likely than men to be direct in their requests for help, calling upon obligation that can be seen as manipulative on the part of the would-be male mentor (Bresnahan, 1993).

The hazards to a successful mentoring relationship are important to document, and then overcome, because of the key importance of mentoring to a woman's success in academe.

TWO TYPES OF "KNOWERS" IN ACADEME

The successful woman quoted at the beginning of this essay focused on her goals. Her mentors recognized her abilities and potential. What about the women who are less focused, who do misunderstand the rules of the system, and, therefore, the exterior expectations, in

order for her to succeed? I consider this category of woman in academe to be a “proceduralist,” according to the definition given by Belenky et al. (1986, p. 15). A woman in this epistemological position is invested in learning. The proceduralist seeks gratification in pleasing others (p. 134).

So, two categories of “women as knowers” exist in academe: *constructivists* and *proceduralists*. These two categories of “knowing” are at the top of a hierarchy proposed by Belenky et al. (1986). Lower categories, which begin with subjective knowing fail to incorporate objective learning, or, lower still, describe a woman incapable of creating knowledge on her own, of going beyond what authorities say to create their own frame. Women in these lower categories, therefore, by definition are seldom found in academe. That leaves constructivists and proceduralists, who use very different approaches to learning their roles in the academic system. According to the definitions by Belenky et al. (1986):

The *constructivist* views all knowledge as contextual. She experiences herself as a creator of knowledge and values both subjective and objective strategies for knowing. This woman has learned “to speak with a unique and authentic voice” and to “jump outside the system,” and create her own frame (134).

The *proceduralist* woman is invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining knowledge. Her thinking is encapsulated within a system. She can criticize a system, but only in the system’s terms, only according to the system’s standards. She seeks gratification in pleasing others or in measuring up to external standards—in being a “good woman” (p. 134), not in re-defining the system for her own use.

THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY IN MENTORING

Mentoring has several functions. Kram defined them as “those aspects of a developmental relationship that enhance *both* individuals’ growth and advancement” (p. 22), and goes on to define two categories: (1) the *psychosocial functions* such as role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling and friendship, which can help the mentoree develop a vision for herself as well as a self-felt competency; and, (2) *career functions*, such as sponsorship, coaching, protecting and making the mentoree known to peers and others (Gilbert and Rossman, p. 234).

Successful mentoring will take into account which type of learning perspective the woman has. My assumption is that mentoring will make the difference in success for both categories of women, who constitute junior female membership of academe. A mentor for a constructivist will help her negotiate the system according to her own visions and self-defined goals. The mentor for the *proceduralist* helps her define a new ethic of responsibility, taking into account not only her connections with family and others, but also her responsibility to herself and her career.

I am a member of the broadcast academic community, and so I wanted to know how mentoring should work for women trying to succeed in broadcast academe. I surveyed the 400 female members of the Broadcast Education Association (BEA) by sending a questionnaire to all 400 members. Of these, 184 were returned. The questionnaire asked about hiring practices, reactions to career, job satisfaction, opportunity, locus of control, goal setting, and whether the woman was mentored. Items used to identify the woman’s epistemology, constructivist or proceduralist, were based upon the questionnaire items in Appendix A of Belenky et al. (1986).

WHAT DIFFERENCES DOES MENTORING MAKE?

Both constructivists and proceduralists benefit from mentoring. The first gain is in self-confidence and self-esteem. Respondents to the survey who were mentored were more likely than the ones not mentored to perceive equality between men and women in their academic environments, equality in both hiring and opportunity for promotion to full professors. They were less likely to fear that time was running out for them, less likely to fear loneliness and, when confronted with problems, less likely to escape into fantasy than to give more time and energy to recreation, or productive work. Non-mentored women confronted with similar problems were more likely to escape into fantasy. They had more fears of failing, of time running out, of loneliness.

I had more questions about what the women thought of their mentoring experiences, how they benefited, what could be different. I asked 14 of them to discuss these issues. I transcribed the interviews and had coders code responses as to whether the women were constructivists or proceduralists, based upon the definitions given by Belenky et al. (1986). (Coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's agreement co-efficient; using a four-category matrix, $r=.98$.) I had more questions, so I held a focus group at the BEA conference in April, 1993 to probe the issues of how women perceive the tenuring process and how mentoring might assist them. The women had already been coded, from previous in-depth interviews, for their epistemological position: constructivist or proceduralist.

MENTORING THE CONSTRUCTIVIST

Question: To be successful in an educational career, a woman must comply with criteria for tenure and advancement, but can she do so according to her own life goals and priorities?

Constructivist's reply: At the juncture between your goals and their goals you tolerate a certain amount, but after that it may not be feasible. You have to change institutions or you change what you do.

The constructivist acknowledges mentoring as enabling her to achieve the system's goals: publishing, teaching and service, according to her own defined goals and priorities. As one constructivist explained:

In terms of security, of having time to get it, I'm in my third year, so this is looming. I spent my first two years getting my classroom stuff together. I really developed the teaching side and of course we know that's not a valued end of the whole scene. My primary fear about service was being completely sucked into it. I had been on a roll and I really just took on many of these tasks. Our dean—a woman, my mentor—said women do not get promoted as quickly or as regularly, primarily because they take on these really nurturing-of-students roles. So since she said that to me I figured, "OK, I'll just say no on a regular basis." I don't think the department suffers. We're not doing the service things, because we don't have time to do them.

In contrast, consider a non-mentored constructivist's explanation:

I had an experience which really made me see that there is some difference between men and women in mentoring. The head of graduate studies was a man. I asked him if I could go along with the other doctoral students—I was new—to a conference in Minneapolis. He said, no, no, no, I don't think your work is appropriate for that. I found out he had gone up to three men who had come into the program with me and said to them, "You guys need to write something and present it at this conference. It's going to be very good for your career." I ended up going and found that my research paper was absolutely applicable to be presented there.

The woman quoted said that mentoring is "personality-based." She found her way through the system despite not having a mentor, but was still untenured at the time of the interview.

She added:

I'm thinking of myself personally now, where I'm at, and tenure is not a big deal because I'm not looking to spend the rest of my academic days at this particular university. But at some point when I get into an institution and an environment within broadcast journalism where I do want to stay, then tenure will have value for me—it will mean the ability to stay.

Mentors are important to this woman. It was a male mentor who convinced her to return to school after working on international relief efforts in Southeast Asia. He told her, "You're too bright not to have any kind of university training" and emphasized her self confidence sufficiently so that she not only finished a Ph.D. program but is now in a tenure track.

Mentoring for a constructivist woman begins, then, at hiring, with learning of the goals she has set for herself and finding a way to build on these toward the research, teaching and service expectations of the university. The match between mentor and mentoree is the next step—and the tricky one. "Assigned" mentoring usually lacks the motivation required for the relationship to be helpful. As Kram suggested (1988), the mentoring relationship must be fulfilling for both mentor and mentoree. The mentor to the constructivist must be motivated to function psychosocially as a role model and friend, and also to help her develop the vision of herself required to see herself succeeding within the university according to her own goals. This development of self-defined success and envisioning appears to be the primary function of the mentor to the constructivist who, by definition, uses her self as an instrument of understanding (Belenky et al., p. 141).

MENTORING THE PROCEDURALIST

Question: To be successful in an educational career, a woman must comply with criteria for tenure and advancement, but can she do so according to her own life goals and priorities?

Proceduralist's reply: I guess my success is more of a personal issue, whether I was in academia or whatever. I'm terrible with politics and I hate it and I don't intend to do it to achieve some rank or other. I feel I am a success if I have a good relationship with my chair and more importantly to me, my success is my students.

A *proceduralist* conforms to the reality to which she has been socialized. Her critical reasoning is shaped by external authorities on how “they want us to think” in order to win the academic game (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 101) and feel rewarded when they please others.

The proceduralist quoted above was shaped by a mentor:

Question: When did you first imagine yourself doing what you are doing right now?

Proceduralist (tenured): I had a wonderful mentor who taught me well. I got a nice base and was successful in the radio business for ten years. Now I want to help the rest of the people make it. I want to be a mentor to others — when I decided that, I knew I had to go back to my alma mater to teach.

The proceduralist is open to objective knowledge, but she is invested in relationships. She tends to develop a public voice that aims to please others (the teacher) but lacks self expression. Mentoring for her emphasizes the career functions: sponsorship, coaching, protecting, introducing the woman to others in her field. Her task is to see her responsibility for her career and not just for relationships. Her most difficult task is to see herself as expert, to be other than “courteous” to another academic and to exert any kind of power or authority (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 194).

From a non-mentored proceduralist:

I have deliberately patterned myself after men. I come in, teach my classes. My office is really at home. The only way I have been able to do my research and my own work has been to leave the premises and go home. I find my hours are not respected. The chair would just breeze in in the middle of when I was working on something to ask me whatever—to the point I stopped staying there. My boundaries are not respected.

My vision of myself is doing more community service, providing some training. The people I work with are so appreciative of my help.

From a mentored proceduralist:

I have had opportunities from my mentors but there have been things I have not got. A lot of door opening I haven't experienced. I think the key element [in mentoring] is trust. It develops over time. I don't think you can walk up to someone and say “Hi, you're going to be my mentor.” I mean there's a trust that develops and a friendship in that.

From friendship and trust comes the opportunity to enable the proceduralist to create a new self-image as a woman, one who can allow different patterns for herself. These include the coexistence of achievement and family life. Role modeling is the most effective teaching, but often female role models are unavailable. When women do achieve success in academe, they need to be made aware of the needs of women who follow them, who can benefit from their predecessors' experiences as mentors and role models.

CONCLUSION

Directors of academic broadcast programs can achieve success in retention and productivity among faculty women by providing a mentoring program that considers the woman's perspective, her goals, how she perceives career intermeshing with her other life goals, such as family care giving.

Guidelines for providing a mentor for a faculty woman are:

1. Discover the woman's priorities and goal-setting agenda. If she is career-goal oriented, sees herself as succeeding in academe, but on her own terms, she is probably a *constructivist*. If she is concerned primarily with the expectations of others and how to conform to them, she is likely a *proceduralist*. Both learners need to know the process and requirements for success in academe.
2. Match the constructivist with a mentor who can help guide her through the academic requirements by enabling her to see how they fit her self-defined aspirations and goals. Match the proceduralist with a mentor who can enable her to define herself in the context of a career; help her coordinate the requirements of academe with those of family care giving, for example. Help her work within the system to find compromises that allow her to fill her care giving responsibilities.
3. When possible, encourage same-gender mentoring. Provide mentors who serve as role models because they are, themselves, constructivists or proceduralists.
4. Encourage the mentoring role. Recognize the service provided by the mentor. Set up a formal mentoring program, so that faculty members recognize mentoring as part of the service they are expected to give.

Such a mentoring program, based upon caring and trust, is one approach to ameliorating the chilly climate encountered by many women when they enter the academic environment. Whether constructivist or proceduralist, mentoring based on their learning style can help them see themselves as effective, in achieving success. They then set goals for themselves that are productive personally, as well as for the academic program.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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¹Constructivism in this essay is considered to be an epistemological position as opposed to the psychological definition of socially *constructed* reality. The latter definition of constructivism is based on perception. Constructivism as a way of knowing takes into account the woman's socialization — her internalized perceptions and experiences — but adds to it her ability to integrate objective knowledge. She sees herself outside the socialized system, able to use the system to enable her to achieve her own goals that she has formulated using both intuition and personal experiences, as well as what she learns objectively.

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