

Organizational Politics and Culture: An Essential Attribute of the Mentoring Experience for Women Faculty

Sharon K. Gibson
University of St. Thomas

This paper reports on the results of a study on the experiences of being mentored for women faculty that identified the political climate of the organization as an essential attribute influencing their mentoring experiences. The findings identified various aspects of organizational culture and work-life considerations that affected the mentoring that was provided to women faculty. Increased involvement of HRD in the academic organizational context is suggested.

Keywords: Mentoring, Organizational Culture, Women Faculty

Human Resource Development (HRD) is engaged in unleashing human expertise for the purpose of improving individual and organizational performance. Its role in facilitating culture change in organizations is well-documented (Cummings & Worley, 2000; Swanson & Holton, 2001). In the academic environment, however, there have been reports of continued marginalization of women faculty and the culture of academia has been described as less than hospitable to women as they attempt to navigate the various aspects of their positions and environments (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Hamrick, 1998; Hopkins, 1999). Women faculty frequently view themselves as 'outsiders', feeling both isolated and constrained by the existing structure of academia or due to outside responsibilities. There is often no one readily available to assist women faculty in gaining access to the informational networks and organizational systems that are required for success (Watkins, Gillaspie, & Bullard, 1996).

In addition, junior women believe that family-work conflicts are likely to have an impact on their careers (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; "A Study on the Status of Women Faculty", 1999). University work-life programs are described as lagging those in business and industry, which are seen as having a role in supporting the objectives of the organization (Rios & Longnion, 2000). "In sum, cultural, attitudinal, and structural constraints inhibit women's progress" (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 198).

One intervention that has been suggested to enhance socialization, orientation, and career progress of faculty as well as equity for women faculty is the establishment of mentoring relationships (Brennan, 2000; Jackson & Simpson, 1994; Smith, Smith, & Markham, 2000). In addition, it has been proposed that, since women's learning and development may be more rooted in relationships (Gilligan, 1982), mentoring is more beneficial for women, as they have the capacities to use these relationships to better advantage (Johnsrud, 1991). This paper reports on the results of a phenomenological study of the experiences of being mentored for women faculty that identified the political climate of the organization as an essential attribute influencing the mentoring experience. Implications for human resource developers working in academic environments are explored.

Theoretical Framework

Phenomenological inquiry requires that pre-understandings held by the researcher about the phenomenon under investigation be bracketed (i.e., brought into conscious awareness and then set aside), so that the researcher can be fully present to the phenomenon as it reveals itself. Therefore, recognizing that social learning theory informed my understanding of the mentoring phenomenon, I needed to explicitly bracket this prior knowledge and understanding when I embarked on this study. However, it is important to note that the lens of this theory is one that I have found relevant and useful in studying and understanding this phenomenon.

Social learning (cognitive) theory identifies learning as a reciprocal interplay between the person, the environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Bandura (1986) represented this model as a triangle with each factor bi-directionally influencing the others. "In this model of reciprocal determinism ... behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental influences all operate interactively as determinants of each other" (p. 23). However, reciprocity does not imply symmetry in the influences that the various factors have on each other. As Bandura asserts, "The relative influence exerted by the three sets of interacting factors will vary for different activities, different individuals, and different circumstances. When environmental conditions exercise powerful constraints on behavior, they emerge as the overriding determinants" (1986, p. 24).

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In social learning theory, learning is viewed as being firmly situated in its social context. Indeed, environmental factors are noted to be key determinants of learning and behavior. In addition, Bandura's (1977, 1986) description of the components of observational learning highlights the processes necessary for modeling, and as such, provides insights into the factors that influence mentoring.

Description of Methodology

Phenomenology is an interpretive research methodology that is aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of lived experience (van Manen, 1997). Four major philosophical concepts of phenomenology, as founded by Edmund Husserl (1959-1938) are important in phenomenology as a research methodology—intentionality, lifeworld, intersubjectivity, and embodied consciousness (for a description of these philosophical concepts, see Gibson & Hanes, 2003).

In applying the philosophical concepts of phenomenology to research, investigators must go to the lifeworld (the natural world) and study the way in which humans, who are in their natural attitude, experience particular phenomena. In conducting this study, I employed the lifeworld research concepts of openness, encounter, immediacy, uniqueness, and meaning (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997), in an attempt to remain as open as possible to the phenomenon of mentoring from the perspective of the participants who had experienced being mentored. Openness is defined as a “perspective free of unexamined assumptions” (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997, p. 305). Throughout the research process, phenomenologists continually strive for openness in order to allow the phenomenon to present itself as it is. In this methodology, the researcher's role is critical in uncovering the essences of a particular phenomenon. It is through actions taken by the researcher to ensure openness that objectivity is gained in phenomenological research (Dahlberg & Drew, 1997).

Methods

The results reported here are part of a broader phenomenological study that looked overall at the experience of being mentored for women faculty across the variety of mentoring that they had experienced in their academic careers—formal or informal, with a faculty member or administrator, and with male or female mentors at the same or varying ranks—in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the essential nature of this experience. Nine women faculty members who stated that they had been mentored were selected for this study. The key criterion in the choice of these participants was their assertion that they had been or were currently being mentored as a faculty member. A description of the participants is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Pseudonym *	Rank	# of Years as Faculty Member	Age	Discipline
Laura	Professor	16	44	Social Sciences
Sue	Assistant Professor	6	37	Life Sciences
Barb	Professor	14	49	Behavioral Sciences
Rebecca	Instructor	4	48	Health Sciences
Wendy	Assistant Professor	7	49	Life Sciences
Linda	Associate Professor	11	42	Business
Nancy	Assistant Professor	1	53	Education
Ellen	Professor	22	52	Social Sciences
Lillian	Associate Professor	8	39	Social Sciences

* Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of responses

The research question for this study was as follows: What is the experience of being mentored like for women faculty? In-depth conversational interviewing was the primary method used to gather the rich descriptions of mentoring from each faculty member. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. Questions were generated that focused specifically on the faculty members' concrete experiences of being mentored, staying as close as possible to the experience as it was lived by the participants.

As noted earlier, phenomenological research methodology requires that the researcher employ a number of strategies to remain truly open to the phenomenon being explored and to bring to conscious awareness any

assumptions or biases and setting them aside ('bracketing') so as to allow the phenomenon to present itself. This was done both through a journaling process and by applying lifeworld research paradigm concepts designed to facilitate openness throughout the research process. The tapes of the interviews with each participant were transcribed and these transcripts served as the text for the theme analysis. The text was analyzed using the selective reading approach (van Manen, 1997), which involved looking for phrases or statements that seemed to be essential or revealing about the phenomenon being described. A tripartite structure of analysis—moving from the whole to the parts and back to the whole of the interview text—was employed to ensure full understanding. The identification and revision of themes continued through many iterations with each successive iteration being supported by the actual words of the participants.

This research process led to the identification of five essential themes of the experience of being mentored for women faculty: (1) Having someone who truly cares and acts in one's best interest; (2) A feeling of connection; (3) Being affirmed of one's worth; (4) Not being alone; and (5) Politics are part of one's experience. This article specifically discusses the theme "Politics are part of one's experience" which explicates one of the essential attributes of the mentoring experience for women faculty. Two sub-themes, "A culture committed to one's success fostered mentoring" and "A gap was seen in addressing issues specific to women in academia", are described that assist in explicating this essential theme. Following the description of findings, implications for human resource developers are discussed.

Politics are Part of One's Experience

A Culture Committed to One's Success Fostered Mentoring

Women faculty described political and departmental cultures that affected how mentoring was provided for themselves and others. These women faculty had experiences in a variety of academic environments, which ranged from being unsupportive and, in some cases, detrimental to the woman faculty member's success to, at the other end of the spectrum, being described as a mentoring culture where senior faculty were committed to the success of junior faculty. These various departmental cultures had a large impact on both the mentoring that was available to protégés and on what protégés saw as the possibilities for achievement within their academic environments. Ellen described feeling very lucky to be in a department that had what she saw as a mentoring culture.

It is essentially stated by faculty, if not the department head, that we're here to support these people and if we don't do a good job in the mentoring committee, how else are they going to know what they have to do? So that was very much part of the department culture and perhaps brought on by that policy of having a mentor committee who's responsible for them....We want to show this person's very best side to the Dean and to the rest of the community....it's the department's responsibility to lay that stuff all out and give context. I've just been so lucky. I'll tell you. Really lucky. {Ellen}

She described how a mentor committee was assigned to each faculty member, to assist them in achieving the next position level. This mentor committee assisted in her promotion to full professor.

In our department ... we have a mentor committee. And that mentor committee meets with you, sometimes twice a year, reviews your vitae, your annual report, your goals, whatever you ask them to review and they mentor you....So, to help me gain my promotion to full professor, I had three full professors, two in the department and one outside the department....And I met with them probably once a year to figure out if I'm on track. {Ellen}

Lillian also identified a mentoring culture in her department, in that her colleagues were very supportive when she decided to begin a family.

I think that there's some acknowledgement that as an assistant professor who has a young child or is about to have a young child, there are some things that they're able to do to help out....So there's sort of this general acknowledgement that we can work some things out....It was an issue of how are we going to do this, not whether we were going to do it. {Lillian}

She further described the overall tenor of the department in terms of dealing with these types of work-life issues.

I guess it just seemed to me to be a way to try to help me get to where I needed to be in both my academic career and in my personal life and so the mentoring thing, I think, in my mind, is in both of those arenas. And it's not simply a career mentoring kind of process because at least for me with having now two kids, trying to figure out how to juggle those things is always a struggle and thinking about well, how do I

approach my career so that I have some time for home and how do I approach things going on at home so I still have time for my career and the willingness of this individual in particular to help me out with those kinds of things....And I just see that as a way for me to try to maintain both some kind of academic momentum and some kind of family momentum....I see those things as going together. And so that kind of mentoring has been in more of a generic, sort of, family-career arena. {Lillian}

Lillian also discussed benefiting from having other women in the department who had been there a long time and had paved the way. These women's experiences and their influence on the department made a substantial difference in her experience as a woman in that department.

I think that their [senior women colleagues] experiences and their influence in the department had a fair amount to do with that feeling that I had, that this was a place that felt like it would be supportive or at least acknowledge the kinds of difficulties that you have as a person on the tenure track and with small kids. {Lillian}

Nancy described a mentoring environment at her university that encouraged the establishment of a mentoring group for junior women faculty.

We actually have the [specific name] club, where all the junior faculty get together ... and then they have senior faculty come in. So it's like a little club where we have guest mentors....But I think if the environment wasn't like that she [the woman who started it] might not have done it. If there wasn't a mentoring environment type of thing. {Nancy}

She also noted that the following message of support was communicated to her during her interviews for the faculty position:

It was kind of like you're going to be here, you're going to be successful, we're going to help you be successful....and all the people that I interacted with through the process, it was, we're committed to you....We are committed to your success. {Nancy}

Ellen described the difference between an environment in which informal mentoring occurred and one with a formal mentoring culture.

At [name of university], I was brand-new to teaching, [I was] junior faculty. And I just simply believe that [mentor's name] saw that as her role. That was her role. And there were four senior ... women who'd been there, full professors who'd been there several years and they were all mentors....And it was a very informal process. Here, however, it really started out as a formal process and the environment required it ...faculty are advocates for non-tenured, tenure-track faculty. That's the difference. There is an advocacy relationship between the non-tenured and the tenured faculty. And it is our responsibility to get those tenure-track people tenured. {Ellen}

A bad department head or a detrimental departmental culture significantly affected women faculty's experience. Wendy recounted her experience of being assigned a 'mentor', whom she did not perceive as performing a mentoring role.

That particular mentor had been given to me by my departmental head, who had issues with me even before I was hired and he was basically a conduit for him. And once the other faculty figured it out, they realized that that had to be stopped. This whole thing had to be more positive and so I got a second mentor who was very good. {Wendy}

Ellen expressed her horror at the tenure committee process in her former institution, which reflected a culture that was not supportive, that did not work to ensure others' success.

So I sat in on the tenure committees there and I was just horrified at the raking over the coals; you know, "Well, she doesn't, look at here. In this class she only got a 4.5 out of 5. And all the rest are 4.7s or 4.8s. Oh, there's a problem there!" Holy mackerel. I mean, it's just rip them apart and tear them up and spit them out. There was no sense of camaraderie and pretty soon you kind of get caught up in it and, "I'd better find something wrong with this person." Because you want to show that you're just as critical as the rest of them. Oh, what a terrible, terrible place to be. {Ellen}

Wendy further noted that, "Politics can ruin mentoring. So people can take the mentoring system and use it as a way to get information on you." People can be called mentors but not provide mentoring. As stated by Wendy:

I think you can subjugate the mentoring system to a spy system, an informational transfer system, where somebody isn't truly your mentor to help you but does give information back to powers in the department. And I got myself in a situation like that. {Wendy}

Protégés perceived that, in some departments, the effort of mentoring does not get rewarded, so people then tend to focus on other priorities of the job that are recognized. As stated by Laura, "I think that the effort also gets not recognized and that's what puts people off from trying to help in those ways, too." Sue described that a change in department heads, who had different priorities about the importance of being mentored, may have been what triggered her being assigned different mentors.

We got a new department head in who taught this process and obviously thought about it differently to the way the department head previously had. And so he thought this was important and so thought we had to do this, and this is what needs to get done and at that point he assigned two faculty members. {Sue}

In discussing one of her mentors, Nancy noted that her mentor's decision to set up a formal mentorship for her and other junior faculty was based on his concern that, "We'd be swimming with sharks." She stated the following: "If you really care about the junior faculty, you tend to set it up to where there's, if it's not formal, at least there's some mentor system in place" {Nancy}.

A Gap Was Seen in Addressing Issues Specific to Women in Academia

The women faculty who had been mentored described a number of gaps in areas specific to being a woman in academia, that were not addressed through an academic mentoring relationship. In some cases, male mentors were not seen as people with whom female faculty could address certain issues. The relatively low numbers of women in senior faculty positions was seen to contribute to this gap in available mentoring. Barb noted that her mentor, while being highly supportive of her career, was also aware of and acknowledged that she might have some specific concerns that were unique to her as a woman. "I think he was sensitive to issues that I might have, and some of them are, when am I going to have these babies?" {Barb}. Although Lillian felt supported by her department in her decision to have children, she was aware that this could be an issue and that other women faculty did not feel the same in other areas of the university.

Some of that decision to have children probably was influenced by the fact that I felt like I could probably do it here. Without incurring too much, I don't know, wrath of the gods or something. Yeah, I did remember talking to this one woman who is an assistant professor in one of the engineering departments here, at a women's faculty dinner, and one of the issues that came up at this dinner was women saying that they were basically afraid to stop the tenure clock for a year because it would signal to their male colleagues that they weren't serious about their jobs. And that's what this woman said, that was her impression. And I had never gotten that impression from colleagues in my department.... And so I thought, well, this is something that's very different. {Lillian}

Although also viewing her mentor as supportive, Barb noted a gap in her mentor's understanding of certain issues facing women in academia.

I felt there are certain areas where either he or I would've felt that he wasn't the best advisor. Like where is it better, which department is more compatible for a woman. That's hard to know, for I think you have to experience it as a woman to really know. And, he might have been concerned about some departments that had a generally bad reputation. But there were certain people in the field he would've thought, they'd be such wonderful colleagues, and I would think to myself, yeah if you're a man they'd be wonderful colleagues. Not so good, maybe, if you're not a man. And there were certain things he was unaware of. I knew of issues within a department in this campus, where I knew women who had had bad experiences, but he would have been oblivious to that.... So I didn't get into issues like that. {Barb}

Sue expressed that she did not see the mentoring relationship as helping her to address work-life balance issues, as the formal mentorship that was established for her was predominantly focused on her work goals.

It didn't help me balance my life the way I feel like I probably should have and that's something that, I'm not sure where I'd get help doing that from. Maybe that doesn't come from a mentoring relationship....The mentoring relationship was more within the work world and what I was doing and how I get this particular goal achieved. But the kind of larger life question, like how do I balance home and work and those things together is a much harder question and I'm not sure where you go for that. {Sue}

Barb spoke of women faculty who would approach her on issues about which they felt less comfortable approaching a male mentor.

And I think particularly this happens with women in a position like mine, because there are so few women and they come in here to talk about, you know, agonizing over some decision of whether to try to have a baby or not before you get tenure or whatever. I mean these issues that they don't want to talk to their mentor about, because their mentor's a man and wouldn't know what the deep issue is about this. Most men wouldn't, anyway. And so occasionally I have mentoring roles with younger women faculty who aren't really my own students but who come for particular issues related to being a female faculty member who's got to make important life decisions, often about children. That's a tough one. And there's no great solution. {Barb}

Linda noted both the lack of women in her profession as well as the political reality that men were better networked.

I found that males in my profession are just generally better connected. It's just a fact of life so it's nice having [a male mentor], I guess just from a practical matter. Because you're more plugged in. It's terrible, but it's true. I mean there are small numbers of women in [my field] that are in academics and especially that are active in research....Especially at the full professor level, the numbers are just quite staggeringly low. They really are. {Linda}

As a senior faculty member, Barb lamented the lack of women mentors, also noting that, at present, men were in a better position to mentor as there were still simply more of them in academia.

And one thing that I've not found that I think is due to scarcity more than anything else, is I've not had much experience with women mentors because there aren't many women in senior levels in my field. It's not uncommon for me to go to a meeting, like a national small group meeting, getting together people to work on some issue or something and be one of one or two women sitting there at a table of eight or ten people. I mean the further along you get, the more scarce women get! And I have certainly known successful women, but I don't think many of them are in a position to mentor, because there are too few of them to really be helpful to all the women who might be interested in learning from them....I think men were in a better position [to mentor] and there are a lot more of them. {Barb}

Issues of balance for women in academia are seen as continuing to be of concern to women entering the field. Barb continued as follows:

And I worry about the young faculty coming up or young graduate students. Some of the issues are still here of, a lot of young women are worried that, they're looking at us as role models and thinking, who needs this? This is like, impossible! Balancing your family life and your career here and we're not attracting as many people as I'd like into academics right now, because it doesn't look that attractive. And particularly young women I think we're doing a disservice to....And it seems to affect the women. {Barb}

Summary: Politics are Part of One's Experience

The results of this study on the experience of being mentored for women faculty identified that organizational politics and culture had a profound impact on protégés' experiences with mentoring in academia. Women faculty found that different political environments and cultures affected their mentoring experiences. These climates varied significantly across the different academic organizations experienced by these participants. Some cultures were viewed as being mentoring ones, where senior faculty were committed to the success of junior faculty. In other instances, an individual designated by a department as a mentor did not fulfill a mentoring role. Other cultures were actually detrimental to the provision of true mentoring. There was recognition that the nature of the mentoring experience was affected by the political climate in which the protégé found herself. The culture of the department affected the faculty member's perceptions as to her possibilities for academic success.

In addition, women faculty were aware that there were issues specific to being a woman in academia that were not always addressed through a mentoring relationship. There were some issues for which male mentors were not seen as being able to provide support. There were limited numbers of women in some fields of academia and they were not present in sufficient numbers to be able to mentor all the women who might have benefited. Mentoring occurred in the context of an academic institution; the awareness of the political realities of this environment was always with the protégé.

Implications for Human Resource Development

The historic and continuing function of HRD has been to maximize employee potential to contribute to overall organizational strength. This role clearly justifies involvement in women's career progress and interest in the ramifications of inadequate support for women in organizations. (McDonald & Hite, 1998, p. 54)

This study supports the notion that the perceived effectiveness of mentoring initiatives for women faculty in higher education is influenced by the culture of the protégé's department and/or institution. A department committed to the success of faculty members facilitated the provision of mentoring and fostered the protégé's belief that she could be successful in the academic environment. In addition, several women protégés identified the critical role played by the department head, either as a mentor or in ensuring that mentoring occurred for new faculty.

The women faculty in this study also expressed an awareness of issues relating to work-life balance. Women faculty made decisions based on work-life considerations; their decisions took into account their current stage of life. The findings indicated an inconsistent message of support for assisting women in dealing with work-life issues. Often university work-life programs were seen as nice perks that "keep the women on campus happy" but not as integral components of the mission of the institution (Rios & Longnion, 2000, p. 8). The difficulty that women experience in balancing work-life concerns in an academic environment may be a contributing factor to their lower rate of success in academia than that of men (Bentley & Blackburn, 1992; Glaser-Raymo, 1999; Hensel 1991).

These findings indicate that there is high potential for HRD to be engaged in a number of structural, leadership, and development initiatives to support the career advancement of academic women. These initiatives are described below:

1. Selecting department heads who are committed to the provision of mentoring should be considered as one means of increasing the likelihood that mentoring will be promoted in that environment. Responsibility for ensuring that mentoring occurs should also be included as part of the department head's responsibilities.
2. A particular type of formal mentoring relationship that was emphasized by the participants in this study was the establishment of mentoring committees to assist each faculty member in attaining the next position level. The establishment of a formal mentoring committee coincided with the perception of a mentoring culture in the department; a culture committed to the success of all faculty members.
3. The establishment of mentoring programs that cross institutions should be considered as a means to avoid some of the political challenges that face faculty. Protégés would be able to seek input on issues that they might not necessarily be comfortable asking in their current institutions. The establishment of broad-based mentoring programs across institutions would help alleviate the discomfort some women experience in addressing traditionally female issues in their current institutions.
4. Mentoring of others should be a component of faculty evaluation for tenure or promotion. This would enable those with a desire to mentor to be better able to allocate time for this important task.

The findings of this study provide support for the recommendations on improving campus climate and the status of women in higher education as identified by the National Initiative for Women in Higher Education. These recommendations included both encouraging and rewarding mentoring and service work with appropriate credit and developing orientation programs for women faculty on such topics as mentoring and networking, negotiating the institution, tenure and promotion, grant-writing, professional development, and understanding institutional politics (Rios & Longnion, 2000). The establishment of these types of institutional structures has the potential for transforming the academy in ways that could have a long-term impact on the experiences of women who choose academia as their career path. As expressed by Lynn Gangone, Executive Director of the National Association for *Women in Education*:

We need to really move from incremental changes and adding equity and diversity as add-ons somehow to really transforming the academy and looking at what are the structural changes that we need to really make a difference, so that when we talk about excellence in education, equity and diversity are part and parcel of that, not just an addition. (Rios & Longnion, 2000, p. 5)

This study supports the provision of mentoring as an important component of campus climate improvement initiatives for women in the academic environment and points toward the establishment of a new model of academic leadership that is committed to the success of the more diverse population of faculty members that is now present in academic institutions

These findings make a compelling case for HRD to become more involved in issues related to women in academic organizations. HRD has expertise in aligning cultural interventions to support the development of individuals, which translate into organizational performance. HRD professionals also have expertise in personal development strategies and leadership development, as well as organizational transformation. The needs identified

by this study merit more focus and attention by HRD professionals, as they have skills in and knowledge of change management, systems level interventions, and developmental strategies that will be required for interventions to be effectively implemented in this environment.

The findings of this study on the experiences of being mentored suggests that transforming the academy will require interventions at the individual (mentoring relationships), group (mentoring committees), and organizational (mentoring culture) level. The facilitation of mentoring—individually, departmentally and culturally—is one way to foster this transformation and change in academic institutions. HRD's involvement is both needed and required to make this a reality.

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