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Feminist Fissures: Navigating Conflict in Mentoring Relationships

Kathryn Gindlesparger and Holly Ryan

Abstract: *Scholarship in rhetoric and composition has richly addressed the role of feminist mentoring and how a feminist perspective of mentoring might work across various mentoring configurations. However, there is little feminist rhetorical scholarship that discusses the transition from a graduate mentoring group to a faculty mentoring group. This case study examines how one group navigated the change from graduate mentors to faculty mentors, revealing how unarticulated conflict lead to the end of the relationships. In unpacking this narrative, this article argues that feminist mentoring scholarship has not done enough to openly discuss the role of conflict in mentoring. Lacking scholarship to guide the transition of the group, the members instead relied on assumptions about the role of feminist mentoring and what it means to be a feminist mentor. This piece offers ways of embracing conflict in feminist practices.*

Keywords: *mentoring, faculty, graduate student, feminist mentoring, conflict*

Mentoring has been a core value in the field of rhetoric and composition for decades, and practitioner-scholars take seriously the role mentors play in training graduate students and new faculty for academic, professorial, and administrative work. As women trained in that tradition, mentoring is key to our academic identity, a vital part of our professional development and an important way we give back to the field. Given this deep-rooted commitment, it might come as no surprise that in 2013, when our long-standing mentoring group dissolved, we felt a significant emotional loss. For some, this dissolution might seem par for the course: as people grow and their needs change, they move on from the structures they once leaned on. However, for us, we felt a deep concern that we had failed one another and the field by not finding ways to make our group work, despite the clear indicators that the group no longer served its purpose. This article is a reflective analysis and meditation on the fissures that emerged in our group and how they contributed to our

eventual break-up. A key focus is analyzing our negative reaction to this dissolution, reactions which were rooted in a problematic set of assumptions about feminist mentoring. While changes in personal and professional relationships are a natural byproduct of the transition to faculty life, we want to speak out against the feelings of guilt and shame that might manifest when these transitions do not go as planned. We hope this article offers other feminist mentoring groups productive ways of evolving through mentoring relationships that are not rooted in shame, guilt, or false narratives.

This article also serves as a sequel to the advice about graduate mentoring groups given in *Women's Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. In their foundational book, Michelle Ballif, D. Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford outline a process for mentoring graduate students at the dissertation stage. Students under a single advisor work as a group to give and get feedback on their projects. Mountford organized her graduate students into this mentoring configuration once they reached the dissertation-writing phase. Ballif, Davis, and Mountford write:

Every student member reads each other's work and responds in written form, and they then meet either at someone's home, a quiet cafe, or someplace on campus to discuss possible revisions. Chapters must be workshopped and revised before they are submitted for Mountford's review. [...] [T]he biggest benefit, Mountford claims, is that she no longer serves as the sole emotional support system for each student. They call each other between meetings, she notes, to offer encouragement. They are also harder on the drafts than she is much of the time, Mountford claims, which means she spends her time solving problems rather than convincing students they have them. (141)

In this kind of mentoring, students support, guide, and challenge each other through an unfamiliar process: dissertation writing and, potentially, the academic job market. While the mentees are free to work together on issues with which they can confidently help one another, it is under the gaze of an experienced faculty member who can offer help with scholarship and model professional behavior based on her own experiences and expertise.

Ballif, Davis, and Mountford's discussion of the group is largely under the guise of how to structure advising since the context of the discussion in *Women's Ways* is how to sustainably advise multiple PhD students at one time. However, we experienced this mentoring configuration as support for students' professional advancement. Professional advancement refers to the process of shifting from student to expert in the field by disseminating research, most often through publication. By publishing, a person advances in

the field by becoming more well-known and a more accomplished scholar. Dissertation work is the starting point for professional advancement.

We were members of Mountford's dissertation writing group at the University of Arizona and benefitted enormously from the group. We benefitted so much, in fact, that after graduation, we decided to continue the mentoring group ourselves. After graduating and securing academic appointments, we had become such a part of one another's lives that we could not imagine not meeting on a regular basis (something we will discuss later in the article). We decided to keep the same format, attempting to mentor one another on our scholarship. As we settled in to our tenure-track positions at our new institutions, we quickly leaned on each other to help us make the transition to faculty member. Since we were all WPAs at small colleges, we found that we sought advice on how to negotiate the local and complex demands of our new positions. Our group shifted from a writing group, working to advance ourselves as experts in our field, toward a focus on developing our professional identities; this shift was key in our dissolution and is part of what we want to analyze. Professional identity development refers to the process of becoming versed in the literacy practices surrounding the political and professional navigation of faculty life, specifically the non-publishing aspects of our work. While this worked for a while, soon our group started meeting sporadically, dividing our attention to changing life circumstances (namely children), and each member started to produce fewer pages of scholarship. The group was no longer supporting professional advancement *or* identity. Eventually, it was time to end the group.

Looking back, the case of our dissolution is ripe for analysis because it demonstrates how we told ourselves narratives that weren't tenable in our new positions. First, we believed that our model for graduate mentoring could be imported into our new positions, and second, we believed that feminist mentoring meant that we had to support one another's choices no matter the consequences. Our dissolution shows how our group changed but our story about who and what we were had not. This article provides a case study of a mentoring group that attempted and yet failed to successfully shift from a graduate cohort to a faculty cohort. We argue that the rhetorical purposes of each group are different and without fully acknowledging the transition between those purposes, conflict can manifest and the group can dissolve. The transition from graduate student mentoring group to junior faculty mentoring group has not received much attention in our literature about mentoring, and the differences between those contexts of mentoring are what make the transition untenable in some cases. This article draws attention to the necessity of conflict and change (even including dissolution) in our models of feminist mentoring across graduate and faculty mentoring groups.

Our Story: Graduate Mentors to Faculty Mentors

As Mountford's advisees, we were required to participate in monthly peer review sessions in which each dissertating student submitted chapter drafts to the group and received feedback at our regular meetings. However, when she took a new position at another university, she no longer required her final advisees to meet on a regular basis. Mountford encouraged us to meet on our own, but did not make it a prerequisite for submitting chapters to our committees. Most of the members of the group decided not to continue with the writing group any longer (job market and other obligations got in the way), but a few of us decided to continue meeting regularly. In fact, we met much more often, almost weekly and sometimes daily, to discuss chapters, research problems and other deadlines.

For us the group was invaluable because the feedback on our writing helped make us better scholar-writers. Each member of the group took their role as reader seriously, helping to examine how well we were applying certain concepts and ideas to our larger argument. For example, when Katie decided to apply a Buddha-esque theory to her work on sustainability, the group was able to steer her in another direction that made more sense for the claim she was making. Also, when Holly applied Foucault to her work on pharmaceutical advertising, the group was able to ask smart, thoughtful questions that helped her clarify and define her analysis more effectively. Part of the reason the feedback was effective was because we were all driven by a singular purpose; the dissertation was the only scholarly project that each of us had.

An added bonus of meeting was that we also just enjoyed each other's company. The dissertation-writing stage can be isolating for many graduate students, and our situations were no exception. Near the beginning of the dissertation writing stage, for example, Holly married and moved from Tucson to North Carolina. In this new place, she had no intellectual community and no friends: it was just her, her husband, the cats, and the dissertation. The weekly, sometimes daily, meetings by phone with the women in the mentoring group were not only the sole connection Holly still had to the graduate program; they were also a social outlet. Katie had a similar experience: she had started working at a local nonprofit, and the normalcy of day-in-day-out graduate classes had dissipated. The combination of taking on that new full-time work and having finished coursework all but severed her ties to the campus community. The mentoring group time on the phone was a positive reward for writing. As graduation drew near and our work intensified, the personal started to bleed into the professional. During one meeting, a fellow member broke down in the Del Taco drive-through. She had just ended a relationship, was stressed about the dissertation, and cried, "I just need a Coke!" We totally understood.

Listening to her order the Coke through the crackly drive-thru intercom over the phone was a moment of clarity: we were here for each other no matter what. We were friends and we were grateful for each other.

Once we finished our dissertations, our group experienced a transformative shift. We started mentoring one another about issues related to the job market. The University of Arizona offered a course for students who were on the job market, but while Katie was able to attend (even though she had already completed her dissertation), the rest of us were no longer living in Tucson. Each of us had jobs, but no one yet had a tenure-track position—what we all agreed was the next transition. The job market was brutal for two reasons: first, none of us had ever navigated it before, making each and every advertisement or correspondence from a prospective employer something to be studied and analyzed for hours. Second, we were inexperienced and using our best guesses to construct CVs and letters. Mountford patiently and generously reviewed our application letters, but the day-to-day toll of checking the Rhetoric and Composition Jobs Wiki and stressing about how to contort ourselves to fit into various jobs was shared among the women in the group.

Our group had developed a rapport with one another that made the job market less opaque. For example, we provided a safe space to try on the new identity of “faculty member,” which was an awkward performance to practice. While the job market class could provide feedback, the most specific and difficult feedback often came from the writing group. In one instance, after a difficult practice interview with the job market class, Katie rehearsed her answer on the phone to the often-asked “tell-us-about-your-dissertation” question on the phone with the writing group. The feedback from the job market class had been: can you highlight your main points more clearly? Their feedback, while true, was also wrapped in a collegial politeness that she just didn’t have the emotional energy to unwrap. It took good friends to explain the problem in shorthand: “You’re talking too much. Stop sooner.” With so much unclear and unsaid in the job market process, having friends who could “tell it like it is” felt like a rare gift.

The writing group also normalized the foreign, stressful experience of the job market. By living through one another’s experiences sending out materials, interviewing, and watching the wiki, we began to see how little control we actually had over the outcome: we could put on our best faces and submit our best materials and still not get the job. Because we had come through a stressful process (the dissertations) together in a noncompetitive way, we kept that kind, generous spirit as we moved into the job market.

The purpose of our group shifted in those months we were on the job market: professional advancement seemed to take a backseat to defining our professional identities. Since we had so recently finished our dissertations, we

used that document as evidence of our potential for academic growth and a budding research agenda. Our writing samples often came from a chapter of our dissertations. The professional advancement of having multiple publications did not seem to matter so much because we were newly graduated and relying on our dissertations; absent that immediate push for articles, we were able to focus on crafting documents that defined our professional identities as faculty.

We did not explicitly discuss this change in group purpose. Instead, we implicitly agreed that once we were off the market, we could return our attention to our professional advancement—the scholarship. Publishing could be the sole focus of the group; after all, we named ourselves “Pubwrite,” a riff on our original listserv nickname, “Disswrite,” and an explicit reference to our intention to publish. This change was necessary and exciting for us, but we did not explicitly discuss this change. Instead of choosing one goal or another to focus on for the next few months, our group ultimately tried to be both a support system for professional advancement and identity.

While assumptions regarding feminist mentoring are the main focus of this article, we begin by contextualizing our experiences through a narrative on what we saw as the benefits of the group. In those early days, our group functioned well for multiple reasons. First, we developed strong friendships. We had known each other for over ten years; we had a shared history that led to a shorthand that was comfortable and useful in terms of talking through our writing and work issues (for example, we still all understood indulging a theoretical tangent as “going Buddha,” after Katie’s ill-advised dissertation jaunt into Buddhist philosophy). We looked forward to meeting each week and our time together was just simply fun and rewarding, as friendships are. We enjoyed each other’s company and didn’t want to lose our personal relationships by butting heads over how we should address our work.

Also, we were able to stay in touch with the rhetoric and composition community. Small colleges, where we were all employed, do not often employ more than one rhetoric and composition faculty member, and, if that college is outside of the United States, there may not be another rhetoric and composition person for miles around. The group became a tether to the larger community: people with whom to talk about ideas and have a common language and disciplinary lens. While there are other ways to be involved in the field (conferences and publications), the mentoring group was a free, frequent, low-stakes opportunity in which to engage.

Additionally, the group offered us intellectual freedom. As we moved into our first academic positions, most of us felt a sense of loss at the intellectual freedom implicit in graduate school to explore a range of new research interests. Our time together on the phone each week was a tie to this old identity.

In our new positions, we did not have the same free reign. We were tied to our new institutional missions and taught whatever the curricula demanded, usually generalist rhetoric and composition courses, and contributed to service and the campus culture as was appropriate. At our institutions there were no discussion groups around topics other than teaching. The mentoring group allowed us to continue to discuss other specialty areas of interest with a group of invested listeners.

Finally, each of us was hired into WPA positions, putting us in highly visible roles on each of our campuses. The mentoring group eased us into our new WPA identities, which necessitated a carefully constructed veneer of professionalism. Our graduate student identities were markedly different from these new professional identities; as newly minted administrators, we were put in the position of being experts. To vacillate or show too much weakness would be to compromise our authority. The mentoring group was a place where we could mentor one another through difficult administrative situations and plan for what our public persona would be. Even though publications were the goal of our group, the majority of our meeting time was spent getting advice about specific WPA challenges we each had in our new jobs. For example, when Holly was first hired, she was immediately asked to create a strategic plan and budget for her fledgling writing center. Having never created these kinds of documents during her graduate work, she turned to the group for support. During Katie's first days as the WPA at her new job, she discovered that the basic writing curriculum badly needed to be updated; she used the group to test her arguments for the university education committee so that she could position herself as an expert for faculty unfamiliar with the discipline. At work, we had to perform as expert in order to be taken seriously by our colleagues. In the group, we sought mentoring that helped us to effectively create that performance.

For several years, these benefits were enough to maintain our group, but as the years went on and our lives changed, these benefits were not enough to keep the mentoring group together. We didn't realize it at the time, but the shift that was taking place, from a focus on professional advancement to professional identity development, was setting the stage for the mentoring group to dissolve. While we focused on our new WPA-oriented jobs—perhaps because the demands on a WPA are so immediate—we did not focus on our scholarly advancement and thus disengaged with the writing process. We thought the mere existence of our group provided the “support and affirmation” so thoroughly explicated throughout Ballif, Davis, and Mountford's project (143). As we discussed the breaking points in preparation for writing this article, we found that our actions weren't conscious decisions, but performative and constructed acts that maintained the powerful status quo of

support and friendship. The unverbilized shift from scholarship to identity formation caused fissures in our working relationships. Without a singular goal like the dissertation or larger project, we often prioritized our own needs ahead of needs of the group, making the meetings at times unproductive and not fulfilling. Our personal lives became more complicated too, as we had extended our families—we now had spouses and children. We double-booked the mentoring time for breastfeeding or office hours; the lack of focus during the meetings meant that we weren't supporting advancement as well as we thought we were. Once we returned to our scholarship, we needed to seek expertise outside of the group because we could not support each other's professional advancement: no one in the group had the same sub-discipline, making substantive feedback challenging. These fissures, like in cracks in a rock, did not cause an immediate break, but rather weaknesses.

Assumptions about Feminist Mentors

After a series of missed meetings, backchannel online chats and finally a quick confrontation during a writing group phone call, the group decided to stop meeting in order to spend time getting feedback from other, newer mentors. After not meeting for several weeks, before a writing meeting on the phone one day Holly admitted to Katie that she was seeking advice on an article from another faculty member at her institution; she mentioned feeling guilty for not telling the other members of the group that she was seeking outside help. Katie also confessed to seeking mentoring advice from a new group that could help her prioritize her projects.

Eventually both Holly and Katie explained to the other group members that they had sought advice and support from outside sources. No one in the group was particularly troubled by what we thought was an admission, and, in fact, the group supported our decisions to have additional mentors. However, in that moment of confession, both Katie and Holly felt such relief because we had felt such guilt and shame about not being good feminist mentors. The guilt was really connected to our (mis)understanding about the narrative of feminist mentoring. Because we assumed that feminist mentoring relationships should be unchanging (unwavering), guilt and shame began to well up. The fissures and the realization of the benefits/drawbacks were usually experienced in private moments of reflection, not shared among the group members. We proceeded in shame, keeping the mentoring positive and relatively superficial. Our indebtedness to each other—and our commitment to mentoring—kept us from finding the mentoring we actually needed. We avoided conflict.

When we decided to write this article, we needed to figure out why we felt so guilty and shameful at the dissolution of our group. While there are

multiple personal reasons (“I should have tried harder to make it work!”), we agreed that the problem wasn’t simply individualistic. We believe that there were two reasons why our feelings manifested as guilt and shame: first, the narratives around mentoring that currently exist do not account for our experiences; and second, the stakes we had in the group were so powerful that we thought our dissolution would jeopardize our professional advancement and identity profoundly.

The stories we told ourselves about what it means to be a mentor informed why we felt so guilty. Our assumptions about feminist mentoring were two-fold. First, feminist mentors are unwavering, and second, there must be support for both the personal and the professional. These assumptions were mostly solidified in our undergraduate experiences. Katie’s formal exposure to feminism came from interdisciplinary undergraduate women’s studies classes where students were encouraged to contextualize feminist theory with their own lived experience. These classes emphasized solidarity, with a hint of essentialism thrown in. The subtext of all of the coursework was political: women should stick together. Holly’s exposure to academic feminism was similar, cobbled together through a variety of undergraduate classes and experiences in education and then graduate classes in rhetoric and composition. Holly’s undergraduate work as a Resident Assistant exposed her to rape crisis training, SafeZone training, and gender equity initiatives. Both of us ardently supported women’s causes on our undergraduate campuses, attending protests and participating in awareness events like Take Back the Night.

In graduate school, we both saw the underlying theme of “women sticking together” reflected back to us through a variety of experiences. For example, our own graduate school mentor, Roxanne Mountford, often worked with feminist (and female) collaborators, writing articles and books with her graduate school friends Diane Davis and Michelle Ballif. Her feminist colleagues called in to contribute to our graduate seminars by phone. At conferences, we watched cohorts of feminist mentors network. A favorite memory of Katie’s from graduate school is attending the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition meeting on Wednesday night at the New York CCCC and watching the reunion of what looked like several graduate school friends. These women seemed to have it all together: they were dressed to the nines in shawls and arty-looking jewelry, carried neat-looking briefcases (as opposed to my backpack stuffed full of student papers), and kissed and hugged in what registered to be the chicest performance of collegial love ever witnessed. It was clear that they had a personal relationship as well as a professional one. Their performance was also conventionally female—the jewelry, the kisses—which further enforced the idea that “women stick together.” This idea that feminist mentors blend the personal and the professional is echoed in “Wednesday

Night," a clip from the 25th anniversary version of a documentary about the history of the coalition, in which Krista Ratcliffe and Lynèe Lewis Gaillet agree that the "first order of business" when they see each other is to hug.

Unsurprisingly, our assumptions that feminist mentors should stick together and that feminist mentors integrate the personal and professional are also reflected in the wider feminist literature. During our undergraduate experiences, Holly and I were both influenced by feminist writers like bell hooks, who emphasized the solidarity between women ("Feminism") and also the importance of diversity among women. In her retrospective of the professionalization of the women's movement, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth notes that indeed, second wave feminism has been marked by the sometimes divergent commitments to solidarity and professional advancement, saying

Since the nineteen-sixties the women's movement in the United States has sponsored two potentially divergent agendas: solidarity and professional success. These agendas do not necessarily conflict, although they do seem to work best in a particular sequence. When women emphasized solidarity first, they improved their economic and professional situation; when women emphasized professional ambition first, solidarity tended to go out the window at substantial cost to the women's movement. (Ermarth 39)

What Ermarth says about the women's movement is also true for our group, as a microcosm of the larger cause. As a bloc, women do better together (achieve higher pay, etc), but when we are focused on ourselves and not focused on the cause, the cause suffers. When our group started paying attention to our own individual needs, it started to feel individualistic and self-serving. This idea that professional advancement must come at the expense of solidarity is one that resonates with us because this trope is precisely where our guilt comes from. Perhaps rightly so, we were afraid that when our support for one another's research waned around the time of the job market, that our solidarity was also at risk.

Mentoring Scholarship

The tropes of solidarity and professionalism are present in the wider mentoring scholarship, as well. These narratives are positive and productive. Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford's work in "Educating Jane" provides a useful definition for the power of mentoring. They argue that mentoring supports "the desire to create access to and new avenues for academic and personal development," and it "promote[s] strong pedagogy, [...] foster[s] professionalism, and [...] enable[s] individuals to set and accomplish new goals" (30).

Others have echoed Fishman and Lunsford's attitude toward mentoring, especially in the "publish or perish" culture of higher education. In "Get Together to Write," Jennifer Friend and Juan Carlos González describe a writing group of first-year tenure-track faculty at the same institution who met monthly to critique approximately five pages of writing, although the group would meet for up to six hours to work on entire manuscripts (33). Friend and Gonzalez share that their group "fostered greater collegiality and helped [...] establish friendships based on the advancement of critical scholarship" (33). Initially, our group bought into this story in our own practice even though our group functioned remotely, unlike the writers at Friend and Gonzalez's institution: our friendships grew deeper, our connections felt stronger, and our trust and dependence on one another became more deeply rooted.

The narrative of a feminist mentoring group is also ingrained in mentoring rhetoric. Feminist mentors actively eschew the dominant hierarchical paradigm of mentoring, creating a more egalitarian working relationship. Gail McGuire and Jo Reger argue that "co-mentoring" is an inherently feminist concept because it flattens the hierarchies that traditional mentoring relationships require. Co-mentoring relies on feminist principles that underpinned our writing group's values: we were mindful that each of us had her own academic career path and that no one's experiences were more valued than the others'; we were careful not to become competitive; and we tried our best to integrate the personal and the professional by considering our emotions and checking in on our lives outside of academe. These values were demonstrated when we supported each other on the job market for different jobs, when we supported each other for the same jobs (non-competitive), and when we let ourselves have moments of humaneness within the writing group meeting (driving through Del Taco for a post-breakup Coke). But more than our varieties of strengths and specialties, it was our participation in the dialogue and collaboration during our meetings that made the feminist mentoring possible. Gail Okawa suggests that reciprocity among mentors and mentees is a crucial part of the mentoring process, and that the process should be "shared, reflective, and democratic" (528). We expected that the group was a shared, reciprocal space, and that expectation was feminist in itself.

When the group failed, we assumed we were not sharing enough, being reflective enough, or democratic enough. We thought our friendships were falling apart, like we weren't supporting each other fully enough. When our group failed, we were left to feel that there was something wrong with us because we were starting to tell a story that wasn't reflected in the literature.

Conflict Management or Lack Thereof

Rhetoric and composition studies offers some insight about how to understand interpersonal conflict. In their article “Collaboration and Conflict in Faculty Mentoring Situations,” Mara Holt and Albert Rouzie offer a dialogue about their mentoring relationship that highlights the various conflicts they experienced as a senior and junior faculty mentor pair. In one particularly relevant paragraph, Rouzie’s voice says:

I saw myself as more conflict-phobic. I thought of conflict as unpleasant and unproductive, something to be avoided. I still think it’s unpleasant, but before our conflict could yield any benefits, I had to unlearn my attitude that it was counter-productive [sic]. I had to realize that not only was conflict inevitable, it was necessary and productive, provided you can work through it to some resolution. All collaborations require conflict whether expressed or repressed. No conflict, no collaboration. (84)

It is important to note that Holt and Rouzie discuss conflict in a hierarchical mentoring relationship; the “master and apprentice” model. Much of their conflict came from the intentional separation of the personal and the professional. Many mentoring relationships that address identity development (like our group did) and/or are organized around personal and professional friendships can experience similar conflict because collaboration requires a transformation from the individual to the collective identity.

Transformation of any kind can be uncomfortable; looking back on the path of our group, we tended to not address the transformation. This is perhaps not unusual, as negotiating conflict can take several different approaches. The Thomas-Kilmann model of conflict management presents a taxonomy of five styles of conflict management: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, accommodating. A collaborative style involves a high level of concern for goals. It is an “invitational rhetoric that invites the other’s perspective so that [a resolution can be reached] that honors” both parties (Wilmot and Hocker 168). Compromise is a style that results in gains and losses on each side. It differs from collaboration because it “requires trade-offs and exchanges” (163). Avoidance is “characterized by the denial of conflict, changing and avoiding topics, being non-committal, and joking rather than dealing with the conflict at hand” (151). We see these categories as fluid and dynamic, as individuals employ these concepts as rhetorical strategies rather than static identities.

We find these definitions useful for thinking about the behaviors in our group. For example, we tended to avoid conflict instead of collaborating or compromising. Susan Jarratt's article, "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict" warns why avoidance can be damaging: avoidance allows oppressive discourses to proliferate. She encourages feminist teachers to embrace conflict not as "grounds for despair but the starting point for creating a consciousness [...] through which the inequalities generating those conflicts can be acknowledged and transformed" (275). If our group could have better understood what the benefits were (i.e. why we were invested), we may have been able to understand better what each member of the group needed. While this conversation may not have stopped our group from ultimately ending, it may have alleviated our feelings of guilt and shame over being responsible for the breakup.

By breaking up, we felt like we weren't being good feminists, which implicitly entailed being vocal about our support of one another's professional advancement *and* professional identity formation. In short, being there for each other in all capacities, all the time. Our academic preparation, as discussed earlier, had shown us that "the personal is political," and that our relationships with one another are the bedrock of our careers. We believed that staying together was a demonstration of our feminist commitment, not only to one another but also to our advisor; we felt indebted to the long line of feminist thinkers and teachers who had paved the way for us. So when the group dissolved, we felt like we were betraying our friendships, as well as our feminist teachers.

As a way of thinking through what our group might have done differently to have a more productive dissolution, we offer the following thoughts as rough next steps for how to encourage conflict and change. We find Krista Ratcliffe's work on rhetorical listening helpful in determining how to be more transparent about conflict. Ratcliffe argues that interlocutors must listen "for intent and with intent" to understand the rhetorical negotiations at play in any situation, including acknowledging privileges (29). We could have manifested the rhetorical listener stance by considering the following suggestions:

Set goals and review them regularly. The key word here is "regularly." When we started meeting, our goals were broad but workable in the short-term. Our goal was to publish, but after a few months of meeting, we should have discussed whether that was still our primary goal or if it was only a small part of the mentoring we were doing. Having clearer boundaries about what we were trying to accomplish might have helped us to "blame" the change in our careers for the dissolution, rather than question our self-worth as feminists.

Transparently address differences in working styles. Difference is often silenced because privileged discourses about academia are rewarded. Given how racially and socioeconomically homogeneous our group was, our differences boiled down to smaller discrepancies: working styles, parenting choices, invention strategies, work boundaries. Our preferences were things that we knew about each other, but we didn't discuss how they impacted the group. If we could have created a climate that addressed these differences, we would have been better set-up to collaborate through rather than avoid conflict.

Recognize silence as part of the discourse. Glenn's definition of rhetoric as an analysis of who speaks, when, would have been advantageous for us to consider (42). Each member should have been mindful of who was dominating and driving conversations and establish ways of finding what has not been said. By allowing ourselves to sink into the same roles of speaker and listener, week after week, we minimized our ability to share and produce ideas.

Conclusion

Conflict in mentoring groups reminds us of the concept of *metanoia*, which "involves a transformation that can range from a minor change of mind to a dramatic spiritual conversion. Such changes often lead to new belief, which then leads to new action" (Myers 2). We had an old belief, which was that "being loyal" and "being feminist" entailed sticking to one another through thick and thin, and "sticking to one another through thick and thin" entailed providing support for the development of who we were going to be as scholars and how we were going to get there. When we couldn't be all things to all people, we felt like we had failed. We now think that feminist mentoring is acute, rhetorical, and must be carried out on a variety of fronts, with different mentors for different projects (there are different mentors for different needs). We must be adaptable and open to change and even dissolution if that is to the advantage of those involved.

We propose dialogues about conflict and tension in feminist mentoring relationships that are productive sites of transformation rather than ones of shame or guilt. From this initial investigation of conflict, we advise that more research be done to consider the varied configurations that mentoring relationships take on and how conflict can be more transparently addressed in those relationships. We also think there should be more public discussion about the kinds of conflicts women in lateral mentoring relationships encounter, so that the feminist community in rhetoric and composition can more acutely address how to handle those fissures, as a way of keeping more mentoring relationships intact or minimizing the sense of guilt when those

mentoring relationships need to change. Feminist mentoring relationships in rhetoric and composition can and should reflect the larger feminist values of collaboration, listening, and embracing conflict and change.

Finally, we want to underscore the importance of recognizing the roles power, race, and privilege play in the lifespan of any mentoring relationship. Scholars such as Okawa and Carmen Kynard & Robert Eddy (2009) have opened the door for conversations about hierarchical mentoring amongst scholars of color, but a critical approach to power and privilege should be integrated into any scholarship or practice of feminist mentoring groups, as well. This attention to privilege is one of the limitations of our work: we are white, middle-class women in full-time positions. Because the navigation of conflict is culturally-bound, we need more discussions of what kinds of conflict management are appropriate for different discourse communities.

For us, switching to a collaborative conflict management style would have been a paradigm shift from the friendship-oriented accommodation styles (like avoidance) we were used to. As Holt and Rouzie have noted, conflict will always exist in mentoring relationships, and our group would have likely benefited from a collaborative conflict management style. We recognize that because collaboration is a search for a “new way,” these new ways may not be found overnight or over the course of a single meeting. They may evolve over long periods of time, many months, before the innovation is identified.

To aid in this innovation work, the literature on feminist mentoring needs to be fleshed out to explore all the ways mentors can support each other and how mentoring relationships can transition to accommodate career and life changes. We imagine more public discussion about the kinds of conflicts women in mentoring relationships encounter, and more discussion about how feminist mentors repair, revise, rejuvenate, and recreate these relationships. Conflict and change are cornerstones of feminism; we cannot shy away from them in our mentoring practices.

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