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## Dialogic Exchanges and the Negotiation of Differences: Female Graduate Students' Experiences of Obstacles Related to Academic Mentoring

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### Abstract

This study, framed by social constructionism, investigated the dialogic exchanges and co-construction of knowledge among female graduate students, who met to discuss the ways in which the differences between mentors and mentees might be negotiated in order to develop and maintain mentoring relationships that benefit both partners. Ten female graduate students, with qualitative research experience, participated in individual interviews and focus groups. Findings indicated our participants were open to the differences expressed, focusing on commonalities, rather than accentuating or suppressing stated differences. This negotiation of difference enabled our participants to co-construct more complex and legitimate understandings of mentoring. Collectively, our participants expressed a need for mentoring that addressed psychosocial, as well as career functions and mentoring relationships that supported the development of both mentor and mentee as scholars and researchers.

### Keywords

Academic Mentoring, Female Doctoral Students, Qualitative Research, Social Constructionism, and Discourse Analysis

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## **Dialogic Exchanges and the Negotiation of Differences: Female Graduate Students' Experiences of Obstacles Related to Academic Mentoring**

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Throughout history mentors have played significant roles in teaching, inducting, and developing the skills and talents of others (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). In fact, mentoring has been transferred to a number of contexts (e.g., business and educational settings), which has, many times, resulted in a re-interpretation of the phenomenon. This transferability of a phenomenon (e.g., mentoring) across contexts and disciplines may be problematic as there is an increased susceptibility to variation in interpretation and meaning as particular individuals understand and enact a phenomenon for themselves, in their own settings (Brookfield, 1995). In this way, each mentor and mentee, as they engage in the work of constructing a mentoring relationship, must recognize and reconcile their prior knowledge and understandings and their unique relational histories as they construct their own situated understanding(s) of mentoring and being mentored. Consequently, what might be understood as good mentoring by one partnership, in one context, does not necessarily apply or transfer to another partnership or context. Similarly, the nature of a mentoring relationship that creates synergy and transformation for one partnership may create resistance and stasis for another partnership. Indeed, the literature is thin regarding discussion of the ways in which the differences between the mentor and mentee might be acknowledged and negotiated,

leading to a partnership that benefits both. We also acknowledge that the understandings mentors and mentees bring with them to their mentoring relationships influence the nature of their relationships; thus, we turn next to how mentoring within academic contexts has been defined.

### **Definitions of Mentoring in an Academic Context**

Daloz (1986), who studied mentoring within educational contexts, found that his students viewed their learning as transformational journeys and sought guidance from their mentors when they encountered unexpected challenges along the way. Through investigating his own mentoring practices, he understood the mentor as someone who “engenders trust, provides encouragement, and offers a vision for the journey” (p. 30). For many mentees, the mentor served as a concrete manifestation of what they wished to become. Moreover, Johnson and Huwe (2003), who were interested in academic mentoring, developed the following definition as they attempted to describe the contours and boundaries of mentoring in an educational setting:

Mentoring is a personal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced (usually younger) student. A mentor provides the protégé with knowledge, advice, challenge, counsel, and support in the protégé’s pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession. (p. 6)

Meanwhile, Zachary (2000) maintained that learning was the primary purpose of any mentoring relationship. She suggested a learner-centered mentoring paradigm to replace the more traditional “authoritarian, teacher-dependent, student-suppliant paradigm” (Zachary, p. 3). In this kind of mentoring, “wisdom is not passed from an authoritarian teacher to a suppliant student, but is discovered in a learning relationship in which both stand to gain a greater understanding of the workplace and the world” (Aubrey & Cohen, 1995, p. 161). The mentor and mentee shared accountability and responsibility for achieving a mentee’s goals, and the mentor nurtured and developed the mentee’s capacity for self-direction over the course of their relationship (Zachary).

Similarly, Johnson (2003) suggests that “mentoring requires a faculty member to engage in a dynamic, emotionally connected, and reciprocal relationship with the protégé” (p. 129). These kinds of collaborative relationships with mentors were also associated with higher productivity both before and after attaining a doctoral degree (Wright & Wright, 1987). As a result mentoring can be described as very important to the career and psychosocial development of individuals, such as graduate students (Kram, 1986, 1988).

### **Mentoring of Graduate Students**

Mentorships are often viewed as the first stage in an academic career, and graduate students who report a strong mentoring relationship are more likely to be productive scholars, both before and following graduation (Paglis, Green, & Bauer,

2006). Indeed, many graduate students have identified their relationships with faculty mentors as one of the most important aspects in their completion of and satisfaction with graduate school (Hartnett & Katz, 1977). For instance, faculty mentors have frequently taught their mentees the technical aspects of their profession, collaborated with them on research, and assisted them with job placement, networking, and professional development (Kelly & Schweitzer, 1999). Equally important was the trust and mutual attraction that served as a foundation in the formation of a mentoring relationship, and the development of this mutual trust was often dependent on reciprocal self-disclosure between mentor and mentee (Shore, Toyokawa, & Anderson, 2008).

In addition, graduate students often reported that they experienced several socialization and identity formation processes simultaneously over the course of their relationships with their mentors (see e.g., Golde, 1998). In fact, Luna and Cullen (1998) suggest that academe could become a natural environment for supporting and nurturing this mentoring by providing a place in which new values, which focus on relationship building through mentoring, are supported and encouraged (Kram, 1986, 1988). However, graduate students' socialization is also influenced by the structural differences within graduate programs, which are designed as much to make the institution work effectively as to prepare graduate students for their future academic lives (Austin, 2002). Clearly many universities depend on their graduate students to become teaching or research assistants, whose task is to lighten the responsibilities of individual professors. Unfortunately, these assistantship roles, structured in a way to serve the needs of the institution or its professors, do not necessarily provide a high quality learning experience for graduate students (Austin). According to Shore et al. (2008), mentoring relationships benefit from and thrive in professional, collegial contexts that value collaboration and cooperation. In fact, mentoring that is genuinely reciprocal is evidenced by a relationship that is consented to and actively sought by both partners and provides benefits to mentor and mentee in professionally appropriate and transparent ways (e.g., Huwe & Johnson, 2003; Johnson & Nelson, 1999; Jones & Draheim, 1994).

This juxtaposition of individual and institutional needs, as well as state and local priorities, can pose ethical questions. Therefore, we believed it important to discuss the ethical considerations related to mentoring as described by Brown and Krager (1985). According to Brown and Krager mentors serve as role models and help their mentees choose research topics and methodology appropriate to their interests (principle of autonomy). Additionally, mentors have a responsibility for keeping students out of departmental disputes and modeling ethical research techniques (nonmaleficence). Mentors are expected to model professional and personal behaviors that reflect positive growth as a person and scholar and to provide opportunities for students to participate in research (beneficence). They are also expected to treat students as colleagues and to be fair in awarding recognition for contributions to research projects (justice). Finally, the actions of ethical mentors should be consistent with their espoused values across time and situations as they assist students in developing a program of research (fidelity).

Ideally, mentees also assume ethical responsibilities for their actions and interactions within a mentoring relationship. Brown and Krager (1985) suggest that mentees are to remain open to involvement in their mentors' projects and to seek ways in which to combine interests, as well as to promote reciprocity in giving, sharing, teaching, and questioning (principle of autonomy). Mentees are expected to avoid alliances with

questionable pursuits and to refrain from placing unrealistic demands on their mentors (nonmaleficence). In addition, mentees should become aware of their mentors' needs and goals and remain open to receiving assistance and giving it (beneficence). Finally, they are expected to be fair in demanding and giving effort and to respect their mentors as people and scholars (justice), to follow through on collaborative efforts and projects, and to be truthful in their self-representations (fidelity). However, while these ethical principles might be used to guide behavior, they are not intended as prescriptions, and both mentors and mentees are expected to assume responsibility for resolving the dilemmas that might arise from the tensions inherent in the diverse perspectives and sometimes competing interests of their relational partners. In these ways, the literature seems to suggest that effective mentoring assumes a number of relational responsibilities for both partners, but is thin with respect to how these relational responsibilities might be negotiated and the obstacles that women encounter when seeking to develop relationships with mentors. Therefore, in the next sections we discuss some of the barriers and challenges mentors and mentees might face as they construct a relationship and engage in the work and responsibilities of mentoring.

### **Obstacles Related to Mentoring**

Although there is some consensus among the multiple definitions proposed by various scholars, the layered and situated interpretations of mentoring between specific partners in a particular context, complicate the development of mentoring relationships and create various obstacles related to mentors' and mentees' understanding of mentoring, their expectations for mentoring, as well as the values that guide their mentoring. For example, Mullen (2005) found that while mentoring may assume multiple and complex forms, it is generally understood as a "personal or professional relationship between two people—a knowing, experienced professional and a protégé or mentee—who commit to an advisory and non-evaluative relationship that often involves a long-term goal" (p. 2). Thus, even as we seek a shared understanding of the phenomenon, mentoring is often viewed as a complex, diverse and complicated phenomenon encompassing "myriad of [sic] social and psychological interactions based within diverse organizational and personal settings which are often subjected to differing aims, objectives, and interpretations identified by the organization, the mentor, and even the mentee" (Roberts, 1999, p. 145). Consequently, it would seem that any understanding of mentoring would be influenced not only by the individual characteristics and perspectives of the relational partners, but also by the context in which they are situated. Indeed, the barriers and challenges to effective mentoring seem to be internal as well as external, individual as well as institutional.

### **Obstacles Specific to the Responsibilities of Mentors and Mentees**

Mentors are often expected, indeed, required to assume multiple roles for their mentees (Dohm & Cummings, 2002; Kram, 1986, 1988; Levinson, 1978, 1996; Zachary, 2000). In fact, Daloz (1986) argues that the first responsibility of a mentor is to listen to the dreams of the mentee. He wrote that mentors are *spiritual guides* who:

Lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way. (p. 17)

Kram (1986, 1988), in turn, identifies two broad categories of roles that enhance mentees' personal growth and professional development. According to Kram, the two categories are career functions, which include sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments; and psychosocial functions, which include role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship or mutuality.

This multidimensional socialization often proves crucial to graduate students' appreciation of a university's research process, as well as of their own academic experience (Lyons, Scroggins, & Rule, 1990). Moreover, mentors, who only focus on roles associated with career functions, may be deemed ineffective by mentees whose psychosocial needs remain unmet within the mentorship. In fact, in the study conducted by Lyons et al., graduate students report that the greater the mutuality (sharing of reciprocal feeling and values) and the comprehensiveness (coverage of interpersonal roles and interactions across diverse contexts and tasks), the more positive and beneficial the relationship.

Furthermore, the roles of mentors and mentees are constantly shaped and negotiated during mentoring relationships. Because each mentoring relationship is constructed by its participants, the various roles associated with mentoring acquire meaning within the sphere of each individual relationship (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1999). Therefore, clarity about the relationship and the roles the participants might assume is frequently the basis for developing an effective mentorship. However, there may be occasions within mentoring relationships when the relational boundaries and expectations of mentors and mentees become blurred. Zachary (2000) identifies four such instances in which this lack of clarity concerning the roles of the participants may cause the partnership to fail: (a) role collusion (roles are taken for granted and expectations are not discussed), (b) role diffusion (mentors assume unnecessary and unreasonable roles resulting in the failure of their mentees' developing independence), (c) role confusion (lines of authority are blurred and roles are overlapping), and (d) role protrusion (mentors interfere and unnecessarily intercede on behalf of their mentees).

Finally, the behavior or personality of mentees might contribute to the dynamics of a mentoring relationship. Mentees who are perceived as resistant, unfocused, manipulative, apathetic, untrustworthy, or incapable of authentic communication may prove to be obstacles in the development of productive mentorships (Zachary, 2000). Although some mentoring relationships might never become functional and satisfactory, the identification of conflicts and barriers could enable mentors and mentees to openly negotiate the roles and expectations related to their mentoring relationship in ways that would serve the needs of both parties. However, while the literature identifies a number of qualities and behaviors that either promote or constrain the development of a mentoring relationship, we believe it is also important to explore how the partners attempt to address the barriers and negotiate a relationship that meets the needs of mentor and mentee.

### **Obstacles Specific to Mentoring Women with Multiple Roles**

Having a mentor or several mentors can be extremely valuable for a woman in attaining her ultimate goals (Scanlon, 1997). A mentor:

May foster [a woman's] career development by exposing her to challenging experiences that increase her vision and self-reliance, by providing emotional support, by expanding her vision, by developing her awareness of the institutional culture at the top levels, and by increasing her visibility with those in power. (p. 48)

In addition, a number of other studies have reported that gifted women, in particular, benefit from close mentoring, as they often face internal and external obstacles, as well as many conflicts between their own abilities and the social structure of their worlds (see e.g., Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999; Reis, 1998). Indeed, some researchers argue that it is beneficial for the professional development of women graduate students to have same gender mentors (Holmstrom & Holmstrom, 1974). However, there are reports that the culture of academia is less than hospitable to women as they navigate their positions and their contexts (Cawyer, Simonds, & Davis, 2002; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Wilson, 2003), and women frequently feel isolated and constrained by the existing structures of academia, as well as outside responsibilities (Gibson, 2006). Furthermore, mentoring that involves cross-gender relationships, nontraditional-age women, and minority women presents additional complex considerations (Bruce, 1995), which might include coming from environments that do not support their professional ambitions (Blackwell, 1989) or being perceived as unworthy of a mentor's investment due to a potentially shorter career track (Dreher & Ash, 1990).

According to Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000), good mentors of women are those who provide open communication, personal connection, opportunities for reflection, and specific feedback. These mentors also encourage risk-taking and serve as advocates for their mentees. Young, Alverman, Kaste, Henderson, and Many (2004) concur and suggest that effective mentoring for women is characterized by interdependence between participants that promotes a respectful collaboration. According to Young et al.,

This interdependency suggests a mentoring relationship in which mentor and mentee are connected, while at the same time they are working to maintain or develop a sense of autonomy. They value and respect each other for what they bring to the relationship and appreciate the sociality in which knowledge is produced, exchanged, and understood. (p. 32)

In other words, this connectedness between mentors and mentees encourages the growth of both participants through collaboration and relational knowing, which may promote and support the destruction of traditional mentor/mentee hierarchies.

While the use of power may become problematic in any mentoring relationship, the notion of power as structured and unequal (with regard to gender, race, and age)



sometimes produces obstacles and a kind of powerless behavior in female mentees, such as passively waiting for the mentor to decide how the relationship will proceed (see Grant, 2001). Heinrich (1995) describes two types of power that influence mentoring relationships: personal power and legitimate power. She describes personal power as the power within an individual. Both mentor and mentee possess personal power. Legitimate power is the power invested in individuals by an institution (Heinrich). Thus, only mentors have legitimate power. Additionally, Heinrich uses the following typology to describe the ways in which mentors and mentees negotiate power within their relationships and how power may be manifested during conflict resolutions: *power with* relationships, *power over* relationships, and *power disowned* relationships. Ultimately, it could be argued that women benefit most from mentors who own their legitimate power and nurture their mentees' professional growth through the sharing of power and the negotiation of difference (Heinrich; Storrs, Putsche, & Taylor, 2008). It is this negotiation of power and difference that we wished to explore in our study.

The literature is replete with the benefits of mentoring and the qualities of effective mentors and mentoring relationships. A number of barriers and challenges to effective mentoring are also described and discussed. We know that a mentoring relationship is affected by the prior experiences and relational histories of its participants, but what seems to be missing from the literature is a discussion of the ways in which the mentor and mentee might share power and acknowledge and negotiate their differences, leading to a partnership that benefits both. Therefore, we wished to engage women, who were graduate students, in a dialogue about their experiences, both positive and negative, and ask them to reflect on what differences existed between themselves and their mentors. We also wanted them to consider how these differences in their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of mentors and mentees, as well as their varying expectations related to the work of mentoring might have been acknowledged and accepted or negotiated, as they worked toward transforming their knowledge of mentoring and creating a relationship that fostered the intellectual and personal growth of both partners. Because we believe that mentoring is a socially-constructed phenomenon, we explored the dialogic exchanges and co-construction of knowledge among our focus group members who met to discuss the obstacles they encountered in developing and maintaining mentoring relationships at a research university. We were particularly interested in how our participants described their negotiation of the differences (e.g., related to opinions, approaches, experiences, feelings, values, interests, expectations, etc.) they encountered in their individual experiences. Dialogue, as a site for knowledge construction, was key to our study, therefore the following questions guided our research: (a) How do female graduate students co-construct a dialogue regarding mentoring relationships and the obstacles encountered with regard to mentoring at their institution? (b) How do the differences (e.g., in opinions, approaches, experiences, feelings, values) that are articulated, shared, and negotiated in mentor-mentee dialogue influence and shape students' co-constructed story of mentoring?

## **Role of the Researcher**

At the time this study was conducted, the first author (Sharon), a Caucasian female, was a doctoral student at a research one institution and the second author (Mirka), a Caucasian female, was a professor of qualitative research methods in the same institution. Both Sharon and Mirka had faced different challenges with being mentored or having mentored women. For example, Sharon was assigned a mentor when she began her doctoral studies, but she experienced a number of challenges due to their different understandings of mentoring and so she reformed her dissertation committee. Sharon also supervised pre-service teachers in their field placements and she had decided that she wanted to investigate how pre-service and in-service teachers developed their mentoring relationships. She was particularly interested in engaging both the mentor and mentee in dialogues about the construction and evolution of their relationships, observing them as they enacted their relationships in their contexts, and discussing the challenges they faced and resolved as they engaged in the work of mentoring. At the time of this study, Mirka, on the other hand, had had various academic mentoring relationships; some had been institutionalized and some had formed outside institutional expectations. She also had experienced different demands, expectations, and implementations of mentoring practices with her doctoral students. Having to negotiate multiple roles herself (e.g., professor, mother of three young boys, wife, friend, colleague, and mentor) Mirka attempted to mentor her students with maximum support, individuality, and flexibility.

Mirka, who later became Sharon's dissertation co-chair, wrote a small grant to fund this study. Because both Mirka and Sharon had already experienced some challenges with regard to their previous mentoring relationships, they were interested in the experiences of other female graduate students and learning how they resolved conflicts and differences in order to negotiate a relationship that was mutually beneficial. In addition, Sharon was excited by the opportunity to engage in research with an experienced mentor and to develop her skills as a qualitative researcher. She was also intrigued by what she might learn from this study, again, because her goal was to someday mentor novice researchers and scholars.

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical Perspective of Social Constructionism**

This qualitative research was guided by the theoretical perspective of social constructionism and was further informed by the epistemology of constructionism (see e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1982, 1994, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). In conjunction with our research questions, the theoretical perspective of social constructionism assisted us in making appropriate choices for our methodology. Methodology, in this paper, represents an overall research approach that guides this study and includes our theoretical perspective, sampling, data collection, and analysis methods. However, our overall study design does not neatly fit in, nor can it be described by any particular methodology (e.g., action research, case study, appreciative inquiry, narrative inquiry). Thus, social constructionism serves as the framework for the choices we made regarding the design of this qualitative study.

Social constructionism views the self as a by-product of social forces experienced in context. Furthermore, a self is established and understood as a “product of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (Gergen, 1994, p. 49). These interchanges involve the self, significant others, society, and social institutions. Gergen (1999) refers to this process of forming self within relationships, labeling it relational self. Thus, individuals are relational beings who create constantly changing meanings as a result of their interactions with others.

Furthermore, social constructionism assumes that institutions, as well as society, tend to socialize their members. In any social structure a particular focus is given to conversations as meaningful forms of human interaction. Berger and Luckmann (1967) state that conversation is “the most important vehicle of reality-maintenance” (p. 152). New conversations evoke new realities and the frequency and intensity of our conversations play an important role in our continual construction of reality. These conversations and interactions transform the collectively created reality that enables the modification and communication of social meanings. Gergen (1999) further argues for the role of dialogue in social communication and highlights the transformative nature of dialogue when it is based on negotiation, reflexivity, and equal opportunities for communication among participants.

When applying the theoretical and conceptual assumptions embedded in social constructionism to our work, it became evident that mentoring is a social process that is situated in particular cultural contexts. Mentor and mentee are relational beings and each is constituted by the other within their relationship (Gergen, 1999, 2001; McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Furthermore, one’s cultural milieu and group affiliations provide individuals with the lenses through which they view their relationships, their self and the other(s) and endow them with meaning (Crotty, 1998). This construction of self and of mentoring relationships is interdependent and created through individuals’ interactions and dialogue with others. Furthermore, when mentors and mentees enter into a relationship, they bring with them multiple, though not always identical, relational histories that represent a unique combination of communities and voices. Thus, the dialogues that occur within a mentoring relationship are particularized constructions of the mentors’ and mentees’ current worlds, in which their relational histories intermingle and are re-created and transformed (McNamee & Gergen). During this process of transformation, both mentor and mentee discover new knowledge, reshape their identities as researchers, and establish relationships to and with the others in an academic community (see also Daloz, 1986).

## **Study Participants**

After receiving an approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board we began our recruitment. Ten female doctoral students with qualitative research experience and future academic goals were solicited via flyers at a large southern research university. Criterion sampling was used to select the participants who were (a) students currently enrolled in a graduate program and (b) students with future academic goals, e.g., attaining professorship or becoming a researcher at a research university. In addition, participants were required to have prior qualitative research experience. Mentors were not interviewed at this point in the research project. Table 1, which follows, provides a

summary of our participants' demographic information, as well as their qualitative research experience and future goals.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics, Qualitative Research Experience, and Future Goals*<sup>1</sup>

Participant	Age	Status in the doctoral program	Major	Number of faculty mentors	Qualitative research experience	Future goals
Ann	40	Dissertation data collection	Counseling ed.	>3	Research projects, articles, course projects	Professorship in research institution
Daisy	>40	2nd year	Ed. technology	None	Course projects	Applied position (not necessarily professorship)
Diane	>40	Qualifying exams	Science ed.	2	Course projects, assistantship, articles	N/A
Karen	>40	Dissertation proposal	Counseling Ed.	1	Presentations	Professorship in applied field
Laura	30-35	Dissertation proposal	Counseling Ed.	>3	Course projects, presentations	Professorship in research institution
Mary	>40	2nd year	Ed. technology	1	Course projects	Return back to home country: professorship
Meredith	30-35	Dissertation data collection	Vocational therapy	2	Assistantship, articles, grant work	Professorship in research institution
Samantha	>40	Dissertation data collection	Special ed.	1	Assistantship, course projects	Hometown university position
Tina	>40	Qualifying exams	Health science ed.	2	Course projects	Teaching or private sector
Yvonne	<30	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	School psychology	2	Course projects	Professorship in research institution

## Data Collection

The first phase of data collection included individual interviews with the study participants. The semi-structured interviews, which were conducted by Mirka in her office on campus, were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The purpose of the individual interviews was to collect our participants' experiences with mentoring, focusing on the positive aspects of their mentoring relationships. However, data from the individual interviews are not used for this paper. After an initial analysis of the individual interview transcripts, we proceeded to the second phase of the study; focus groups, which are the focus of this paper. Our purpose for conducting the focus groups

<sup>1</sup> All participants were assigned pseudonyms and we did not ask participants' ages directly. However, some participants revealed their ages and others referred to themselves as, for example, being in their early thirties.

was to continue the discussion of our participants' positive mentoring experiences as well as to discuss any negative or harmful mentoring experiences they had encountered. All participants who were interviewed individually were invited to the focus groups. The focus groups were conducted in a university conference room during two evenings. The first focus group had five participants and the second group three. In addition to the participants and focus group facilitator (PI), a co-researcher was present and took notes during the first focus group meeting. The focus group interviews were approximately 90 minutes each and were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Immediately following each focus group session, the focus group facilitator and the observer met to discuss their experiences with and perceptions of the data collection process, as well as some of their initial methodological and analytical insights. These reflective notes and debriefings were audio-taped and later transcribed.

As described by Finch and Lewis (2003), the focus group interviews included the following stages: (a) establishing ground rules, (b) individual introductions, (c) the opening topic, which all participants answered individually, (d) discussion, (e) the final topic, which all participants answered individually. As mentioned previously, the individual interviews and the corresponding interview guide were built around our participants' positive mentoring experiences; whereas, the focus group interview guide was designed to solicit the experiences related to their mentoring that were not helpful. The researchers did not define mentoring for the participants; instead it was left for them to define through questions such as: "What kind of problems have you encountered during mentoring? What could be some obstacles to effective mentoring?" From a social constructionist perspective, the focus group interview provides a social context in which to investigate the production and negotiation of ideas, normative influences, commonalities, and difference (Finch & Lewis). Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson (2001) and Morgan (1997, 2004) suggest that focus groups are useful in studying group processes and meanings constructed within particular groups. It is within group interaction and dialogue that knowledge is co-constructed and differences are accepted, overcome or suppressed (Fairclough, 2003). Furthermore, it was important for us to acknowledge that the focus groups' interactions included a mixture of personal beliefs and available collective narratives that were influenced by particular situational circumstances. Thus, the notion of co-constructed learning, based on previously presented comments, attitudes, and opinions, became noteworthy (see e.g., Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). This guiding epistemological perspective of socially-constructed knowledge influenced the way we discussed and analyzed the data.

## **Data Analysis**

We began the analysis by reading the transcripts multiple times in order to identify text units that illustrated the social construction of knowledge and interaction between participants. The text units we selected for analysis, at a minimum, demonstrated dialogue between two participants. These interactive text units were then analyzed according to two elements of Fairclough's (1992, 1995, 2003) critical discourse analysis: (a) investigation of exchanges, speech functions, and grammatical mode and (b) examination of difference. In this analytical framework, Fairclough (2003) distinguished two types of exchanges (knowledge exchange and activity exchange), four speech

functions (statements, [which can be statements of fact, prediction, hypotheticals, or evaluation], as well as questions, demands, and offers), and three grammatical moods (declarative, interrogative, imperative). After the interactive text units were identified, they were coded with regard to the type of exchange and the speech function. For instance, in the first interactive text unit, the participants discussed the problems they had encountered with regard to mentoring.

**Mary:** For example, I've been going to a meeting with this professor and the professor's not ready to comment on my paper. So although I send the paper in a couple of weeks ago, the professor has been too busy, maybe doing many other things....and he hasn't been prepared to comment on it [my paper]."

**Meredith:** I'm part of a large qualitative research group. The people who are on the staff, some of them are sociologists. And their view of my research and the conceptual models and the ways that I write up my work is vastly different than the way they write. And that's probably been the biggest problem.

**Samantha:** As far as mentorship...I've had it, but I haven't had it. They would probably say that they've been there and if I ever needed anything all I had to do was go and ask. But I feel like, that's their house and they should invite me, not me invite myself in.

**Mary:** I've had that same feeling that Samantha describes. I've thought it's more of a cultural thing. Like....that sense of being invited to talk, you know? When is it that you are, you are just bothering this other person? You're in his office or in her office and you are taking too much of their time. You don't know that. It's very hard to know.

The exchanges in this interactive text unit are all knowledge exchanges. The participants are providing descriptions of and information related to their experiences with mentoring. They are not activity exchanges, which would be oriented toward non-textual actions or getting things done. Although we might infer that our participants wish for certain actions to occur, accomplishing specific actions is not the goal of this exchange. The speech functions within this exchange are primarily statements of fact. Again, the participants are recounting their experiences, although, once again, a demand or request might be implied. Both Samantha and Mary want to be invited into the mentoring relationship, which is one demand they might have for a mentor and is also an evaluation of what they would consider effective mentoring. Moreover the mood of an exchange is related to the speech functions. Because the majority of speech functions within this exchange are statements of fact, the mood is declarative.

In addition, Fairclough (2003) identified five ways to produce and examine differences: (a) an openness and acceptance of difference, (b) an accentuation of difference, (c) an attempt to overcome difference, (d) a focus on commonality, and (e) normalization and suppression of differences. Participants' orientation to difference

affects the nature of their dialogue, as well as their ability to co-construct knowledge. Turning again to the exchange among Mary, Meredith, and Samantha, the participants manifest an acceptance of their individual differences and a focus on accentuating commonalities. Mary, very explicitly connects one of her experiences with mentoring to the expectations Samantha holds for mentoring. These participants did not accentuate or challenge the differences among their experiences; instead they identified connections among their perceptions and experiences in an attempt to co-construct a shared understanding of mentoring. Next, we focused on the content of the talk and on the topics related to mentoring itself. However, this analysis of mentoring talk was conducted only within interactive text units in order to maintain the focus of the analysis within the socially constructed talk and text.

We found Fairclough's (2003) analysis helpful in that it supported our notion of a socially constructed reality and provided concrete analytical tools to zoom in and analyze the interactions between and among participants. Furthermore, our investigation of the differences focused on the multiple and diverse voices created and co-constructed in the text. Fairclough proposed that individual texts differ in their orientation to difference, assisting or hindering what Bakhtin (1981) calls "dialogization" (p. 42). Thus, "the production of interaction as meaningful entails active and continual 'negotiation' of differences of meaning; the 'norms' of interaction as a moral order are oriented to and interpreted differently by different social actors, and these differences are negotiated" (Fairclough, p. 41). The results of our analysis will be shared in our findings section. We begin by providing examples of our participants' interactions and characterize the nature of their exchanges, speech functions, and grammatical moods. We then turn to an examination of how our participants acknowledged and negotiated the differences in their mentoring experiences, and we identify the barriers and challenges our participants faced when seeking and engaging in mentoring relationships. Finally, we represent the content of their interactions and provide examples of how our participants discussed and negotiated their differences with respect to the barriers they identified. We use excerpts from the participants' interactive text units to illustrate our analysis.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, reliance on the concepts, methods, and inferences of a study as a basis for theorizing and empirical research, of a qualitative study may be accomplished in various ways. Mishler (1990) defines *validation* as a process through which trustworthiness of observations and interpretations are evaluated. In this study we used two different validation strategies (see e.g., Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2010; Patton, 2002) to increase the trustworthiness of the study. First, after the transcription was completed we took our transcripts to the participants for member checking. Participants made comments about some of the intentions behind their statements and one participant wanted assurance that all identifiers would be removed prior to any publication. Second, during our data analysis we utilized investigator triangulation. Data were co-analyzed by both authors of this paper. During the analysis, the authors continuously discussed categories, labels, linguistic structures, and interpretations to revise these structures and interpretations until agreement was reached.

## Findings

The purpose of this focus group study was to describe how female graduate students co-construct a dialogue regarding mentoring relationships and the obstacles they encountered with regard to mentoring at their institution, and how the differences (e.g., in opinions, approaches, experiences, feelings, values) that are articulated, shared, and negotiated in this dialogue influence and shape female graduate students' co-constructed story of mentoring. Because the questions we asked during the focus group interviews elicited information about our participants' mentoring experiences we found that all the exchanges within their dialogues were knowledge, rather than activity exchanges, in which participants made claims about their experiences. Furthermore, most of the knowledge was relayed in the form of statements, posed as statements of fact, although an evaluation on the part of the participant was often implied. For example, Meredith (given names used here are pseudonyms for our study participants) provided this assessment of a former mentor and told us, "He was a horrible mentor because he was rigid and inflexible." This negative experience promoted the mental activity of reflection resulting, according to Meredith, in a "silver lining that really helped me figure out what I wanted and what I needed and it was empowering to become self-determining." The questions that were posed by our participants encouraged further reflection and aided them in making meaning of their experience, refining and sharpening their understandings and focus. Diane asked, "How much freedom should you have?" and then went on to answer her own question in an evaluative statement, "If you're too free, you're rudderless....there's that really fine line I guess between guidance and coercion."

Because the graduate students' mentors did not participate in the focus groups' discussions, very few offers (promises, apologies) or demands (orders, requests) were expressed by the students. The demands that occurred were often couched as projections of future behavior. For example, Samantha framed her request regarding a future mentor's responsibilities as, "that's what I would want from my mentor...that kind of added emotional support for the program." Predictably, the predominant grammatical mode was declarative with a few interspersed interrogatives exchanges. Table 2 provides examples of participants' exchanges, speech functions and grammatical mood, as well as possible barriers to effective mentoring that we inferred from our analysis of the interactional excerpts.

Table 2. *Exchanges, Speech Functions, and Grammatical Modes*

Excerpt	Exchange	Speech Function	Grammatical Mood	Barrier to Effective Mentoring
"When is it that you are just bothering this other person? Or you're in his office of in her office and you are taking too much of their time?"	Knowledge	Question	Interrogative	Unclear relational boundaries and expectations.
"But there is nobody in my department that are specialists in [my] area...So I don't have an expert that I can go to and maybe talk to and have in my committee."	Knowledge	Statement of fact	Declarative	Lack of mentors who share mentees' research interests.



“Professors have so many other things to do as well...Sometimes you make an appointment and you think you’re gonna talk about one thing and you talk about something completely different based on their agenda rather than on your agenda.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact Evaluation	Declarative	Mismatched agendas
“I know in my department we have a number of issues coming up for professors in terms of various kinds of leave or other commitments that will take them out of the institution for a semester...nobody puts up a notice to say this, you just kind of hear it on the grapevine and you realize that it’s totally screwing up your program.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact Evaluation	Declarative Imperative	Poor communication
“Both of my mentors here have been in the process of applying tenure at one time or another. And certainly I’ve felt that I didn’t want to take up their time. Or I was scared to approach them on some days. You know, that really does impede my progress.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact	Declarative	Lack of time
“Some of us were kind of under pressure to get our committees at the end of the first year...choosing a chair can be quite difficult if you’re not sure about people you’ve never worked with...there’s not a clear way of doing things, different professors do things in different ways.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact Evaluation	Declarative	Variation in mentor expectations
“I’m obviously in a different college and to be accepted into my program my mentor had to accept me as a student, so I had met with her and we had to confirm that we had similar interests...in that sense it was a sense of grounding that I had her and that she had fought for me to get in.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact	Declarative	Variation in departmental rules
“I think mentors are pretty special people and I don’t think there are enough to go around. So I think my expectations are pretty low and I don’t expect most people to be good mentors.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact Evaluation	Declarative	Low expectations
“So I was really afraid that I was potentially screwing up my entire future by leaving. And I was just scared personally, professionally. And there were some kind of social repercussions for awhile.”	Knowledge	Statement of fact Evaluation	Declarative	Political consequences

## Examination of Differences

The first focus group was composed of five individuals who engaged in numerous dialogical interactions, thereby co-constructing more dialogue than the second focus group and was composed of three individuals. In the first group it appeared that Mary, Diane, and Samantha were actively involved in negotiating the differences among their perspectives. In contrast, the dialogue contributed by the other participants (Daisy and Meredith) did not actively address the differences between their own and the other participants' stories. The second focus group was composed of three women, two of whom knew each other and had developed a relationship prior to the focus group interview. As a result of their prior acquaintance, Karen and Ann dominated the conversation, with Yvonne usually contributing experiences that were similar to those of the other two women. Table 3 provides excerpts that represent the diversity of speech functions, and grammatical moods and illustrates how the ways in which the participants in the first focus group acknowledged and negotiated their differences in connection with their stories about mentoring.

Table 3. *The Negotiation of Differences during the First Focus Group*

Approach to difference	Respondents	Topic of discussion
Focus on commonality	Mary responding to Samantha	One should be invited to mentoring relationship
Focus on commonality	Diane to Mary	Finding courses and mentoring to match one's interests
Focus on commonality	Mary to Daisy	Uncertainty about the future of mentoring and training
Openness to difference	Diane to Mary	Mentors have different priorities
Accentuation of difference	Daisy to Diane	Different departmental practices
Openness to difference	Mary to Daisy and Meredith	One is capable of changing committee structure
Acceptance of difference	Samantha to Daisy	Fitting into mentor's plan of progress (scheduling)
Focus on commonality	Meredith to Diane	Bad mentoring led to positive self-determination
Focus on commonality	Diane to Meredith	Feeling of discomfort related to changing a mentor
Accentuation of difference	Daisy to Samantha	Low expectations of mentorship
Focus on commonality	Samantha to Daisy	Low expectation until peer mentoring took place
Openness to difference	Samantha to Daisy	Questioning whether mentoring can exist
Accentuation of difference	Mary to Daisy and Samantha	Professors have too many responsibilities
Accentuation of difference	Mary to facilitator	Professors should be open about their willingness to mentor
Suppression of difference	Meredith to Diane	Feeling offended if she were to signed a topic to write about
Overcome difference	Diane to Meredith	Mentor should focus on timing of writing and keeping the student in schedule
Accentuation of difference	Samantha to Diane and Meredith	Mentor should know the needs of the mentee

One of most common approaches to difference during this focus group activity was a focus on commonality. In these instances the women supported each other in their responses and built on each other's experiences. For example, Diane said, "I understand that discomfort you feel," and Karen continued Ann's thought by stating: "To tie into that, I think, another obstacle is the time." Their discussion of disparate experiences in terms of commonalities, rather than differences occurred when our participants described (a) a need for an invitation to mentoring, (b) the importance of finding a match between their own and their mentors' interests, (c) their uncertainty about the future of mentoring, (d) the positive effects of bad mentoring (e.g., increased self-determination), (e) their low expectations for mentoring, (f) their discomfort related to changing mentors, (g) the lack of time for mentoring, and (h) the need to compromise one's epistemological approaches. Table 4 provides summarizing excerpts that represent the diversity of speech functions, and grammatical moods and illustrates how the ways in which the participants in the second focus group acknowledged and negotiated their differences in connection with their stories about mentoring.

Table 4. *The Negotiation of Differences during the Second Focus Group*

Approach to difference	Respondents	Topic of discussion
Focus on commonality	Yvonne to Karen	Mixed method approach is safer way to graduate
Focus on commonality	Karen to Yvonne	A need to give in and give up qualitative research
Focus on commonality	Karen to Ann	Lack of time is an obstacle
Suppression of difference	Karen to Yvonne and Ann	It is up to the student what do they do with their training
Accentuation of difference	Karen to Ann	Professors investments to their students vary
Accentuation of difference	Ann to Karen	Academia's definition of intelligence varies

Participants were also open to difference, expressed by their acceptance of the varying experiences of mentoring as described by their peers. While one graduate student stated that mentoring might be "a valuable experience in all its forms," another student proposed that, "there is that really thin line between guidance and coercion." As the discussion continued, one student shared how her fear in forming her committee was heightened after hearing her peers' experiences with unsuccessful mentoring relationships. This openness to difference also occurred when Daisy and Samantha discussed their low expectations for mentoring and wondered whether ideal mentoring actually exists.

**Daisy:** I think of the things I have done, I have to say, is that my expectations for a mentor are pretty low. Because I think mentors are actually pretty special people.

**Samantha:** Yeah.

**Daisy:** and I don't think there are enough to go around (some laughter) so I think my expectations are pretty low and I don't expect most people to be good mentors...

**Samantha:** I think I have kept mine low.

**Daisy:** Mm hmm.

**Samantha:** up until all of sudden mentorship with this focus group who [have]

**Daisy:** (laughter) [Yes.]

**Samantha:** got me thinking (laughter) about it. You know, I, I mean, I really up until now.

**Daisy:** Yeah right.

**Samantha:** Okay, is there such a thing?

Differences were highlighted and accentuated when the group discussed variations in what professors and students might expect from mentoring relationships. In addition, students compared their differences in terms of the professors' investments in their students and the ways in which mentors needed to be sensitive to students' needs. For example, Diane explained: "I feel like I was really fortunate in that my fellowship has kept me from that (completing a part of professors' workload), that I didn't have to get in that situation, but I also felt a tremendous pull to do what the professors want you to do because is it going to affect me politically?" Mary responded to Daisy and Samantha by encouraging them to consider the "other" in the mentoring relationship and highlighted the professors' perspective after discussing student perceptions. She said, "But thinking a little bit on the other side. If you are professor and you work at this department. Besides your responsibilities of teaching and service and research...I don't know if it says that you also have to mentor?" In another example, Diane described how her mentor expressed no urgency and her studies did not move forward. Daisy responded to Diane: "But in other departments we were under pressure to do our programs of study much earlier than you were."

The facilitator's participation also influenced the group dynamics and openness to differences. In the following discussion the facilitator elaborates on the professors' responsibilities and assigned tasks in order to clarify for the students that mentoring is not listed as a specific aspect of professors' assignments in our college.

**Mary:** and service and research, your contract, I don't know if it says it, but maybe it says that you also have to mentor. So.

**Facilitator:** No, you don't.

**Mary:** Oh, you don't.

**Facilitator:** No. You teach.

**Mary:** You teach.

The act of suppressing difference exemplified the strongest disagreement among the participants. In the previous example the facilitator normalized the dialogue and closed the possibility for openness to difference and the expression of divergent opinions. However, she did it to provide accurate information about faculty members' responsibilities. Additionally, the participants themselves suppressed their differences in two particular instances. They did not agree upon the level of control mentors should exercise over their mentees' productivity or what role self-determination or willpower plays in benefiting from mentoring. Similarly, Daisy normalized the differences expressed by her conversational partners when she closed the dialogue about students' expectations for their mentors and their search for an ideal relationship stating, "Mentors are actually pretty special people and I don't think there are enough to go around."

### **Examination of Co-Constructed Stories of Obstacles Related to Mentoring**

As our students shared their diverse mentoring experiences and negotiated the differences they identified, they were able to co-construct a more complex and multilayered understanding of mentoring, considering aspects of another's experience in order to reflect upon and better understand their own. Analysis of the obstacles illuminated the following problems as inhibiting our participants' search for effective mentors (a) unclear relational expectations and boundaries, (b) lack of mentors sharing the mentees' research interests, (c) unclear or ill defined avenues for communication, (d) lack of time for mentoring, (e) mismatch between mentors' and mentees' agendas and goals, (f) variation in departmental policies and norms concerning mentoring, (g) low expectations, of mentees for mentors and (h) political consequences (fear of reprisals). The following sections are devoted to a more detailed discussion of each obstacle.

Several of the participants discussed how their mentoring relationships were characterized by *unclear relational expectations and boundaries* that often constrained certain kinds of essential interactions between mentor and mentee. Mary needed "that sense of being invited to talk," and immediately followed this statement of fact with a question, "When is it that you are just bothering this other person?" Daisy chose not to answer Mary's question; instead she simply added her agreement with the statement, "professors have so many other things to do as well. You're never sure...[when you are or are not] bothering them."

Because participants in any mentoring relationship come to that relationship with their individual understandings and expectations, there is always the potential for misunderstandings regarding the relational roles and responsibilities of the participants. For example, Diane proposed that many professors were under the mistaken impression that the mentee had become involved in the mentorship in order to relieve the professor of certain responsibilities, while the mentee believed that the professor wished to help the mentee realize her goals. Yvonne, a member of the second focus group, suggested that there is a difference in how students and professors understand mentoring. She stated,

The professor I'm working with as an assistant and they think she's mentoring me because I'm doing the footwork of going out and doing the interviews and doing the research and running the data, but that's not necessarily mentoring especially when a conference comes up and she's using all the data I collected and worked on and not inviting me to the conference.

On the other hand, Ann's contribution to this dialogue reflected her evaluation of the facts of her experience. She believed that "newer" professors might more easily identify with their mentees, even sharing their relational expectations because these novice professors "can remember what it was like. And they know where they came from and what they went through."

Both Mary and Diane described the *lack of mentors sharing the mentees' research interests*, by illustrating their difficulties in finding a mentor who shared their research interests and was considered an expert in the mentees' fields of study. Mary stated, "I don't have an expert that I can go to and maybe talk to and have on my committee...I need that expert." Her statement ended with an implied demand, but she seemed to believe that her search for a suitable mentor had met an insurmountable roadblock and that her request would not lead to a satisfactory resolution. Similarly, Diane found that when she began her studies there were no graduate courses offered in her field of specialization. Switching from a declarative to an interrogative mode, Diane wondered, "Does this mean I need to change my specialization?" In pursuing the answer to this question, Diane related how this knowledge turned to action, which led to the discovery of several science educators in her department who offered independent study opportunities.

Finally, Karen, in a hortatory statement, revealed some of the paradigm and inquiry differences between mentors and mentees when she shared her belief that there was an "unspoken kind of disregard, less respect for [qualitative research]...that certainly would interfere with any type of mentorship." The focus group facilitator expressed her agreement with Karen's evaluation, which led Yvonne to remark, "I totally, I think, agree with both of you and to say the struggle to, your heart is with qualitative, but the mindset outside of you is talking about quantitative."

The participants also described how *unclear or ill defined avenues for communication*, negatively affected their opportunities to effectively plan their programs of study and to find possible mentors. Our participants did not always know how to access information about their programs and some had difficulty maintaining consistent and timely contact with their individual mentors. Both Daisy and Mary commented that course offerings and the availability of certain professors were often learned through "the grapevine" rather than through official departmental communications, and Mary remained in this declarative mood when she stated, "And the trouble of hearing through the grapevine is that you never know if it's true or not." According to Daisy, timely communication would allow students to "actually plan for those things," i.e., professors taking a sabbatical. Mary went on to provide support for Daisy's evaluation, sharing that she had planned to take a specific course, but then found that, "you can't take [the course] because the person who offers them is not here...like right now, for next semester, I

already have to make changes to my program.” Participants wished for clearly stated, accessible communication as to the availability of courses and professors as they attempted to plan their programs of study and their research agendas. Moreover, participants agreed that it would be important for professors to communicate their willingness to engage in mentoring and to clarify their expectations for such a relationship.

Additionally, the *lack of time for mentoring* seemed to influence the participants’ willingness to ask for mentoring, as well as the pacing of their mentoring interactions. Daisy stated that “people say that they’re available, come any time, but often that’s not the reality.” In fact, in her department, she had found that due to other commitments, professors seem to be less available for mentoring. However, the participants were sensitive to the many demands on their mentors and, like Meredith, felt that they “didn’t want to take up their [the mentor’s] time.” Our participants believed that the number of students a professor was asked to mentor influenced the quality of those mentorships.

Karen’s experience was similar to Meredith’s: “You can tell when they’re [the professors] rushed and they really don’t have time to sit down and discuss this.” However, her statement led to the suggestion of a possible action or solution. Karen proposed that a specific amount of time be set aside for mentoring suggesting: “You have office hours, but then you also have mentorship hours and you have time that you’re supposed to do collaborative work.” Ann concurred, as the evaluation of her experience led her to believe that the emphasis at a research one university is on publishing, rather than on mentoring. She suggested that even though technology affords us the opportunities we need in order to establish and maintain contact, she had found that mentors are often “like ghosts...it’s like where are you? I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

In addition, the participants discussed how they had sometimes found themselves in relationships in which there was a *mismatch between mentors’ and mentees’ agendas and goals*. Daisy shared her experience of scheduling a meeting with her mentor expecting to discuss “one thing [and finding that] you talk about something completely different based on their agenda rather on your agenda.” Meredith, in an evaluative statement, agreed: “I always felt like my mentor would be happy if I were here forever...you know, working for them. And in fact that wasn’t my goal.” The differences between the mentors’ and mentees’ agendas had sometimes not even been discussed, let alone successfully negotiated and resolved.

Ann had also encountered the incompatibility between her agenda and that of her mentor. She was opposed to a professor approaching her with “an agenda to advance her or his [the professor’s] research...They want to publish and they want you to do the research for them.” While Ann welcomed the learning experience that accompanies any research collaboration, she resented being viewed as cheap labor. As she stated, “I’m willing to get dirty and roll up my sleeves and do the work, but I had this feeling that I was being used.”

It was also reported by the participants that there existed a considerable *variation in departmental policies and norms regarding mentoring*. For instance, Daisy shared the departmental pressure she felt to form her committee at the end of her first year; whereas Meredith became acquainted with possible mentors ahead of time. This led to a level of comfort and possibly encouraged Meredith to take the risks that would be necessary to develop as a researcher and scholar. Those participants, who were required to make

hasty decisions regarding possible mentors, had evaluated their situations and recognized that they might need to find different mentors as they narrowed their focus and became more selective about their research interests. As Mary said, “I know I might change some [mentors] at some time.”

Both Daisy and Samantha agreed that because effective mentorships were hard to find, as mentees, they had *low expectations for their mentors*. These interactions, while offered as statements of facts, were often evaluative. For instance, Samantha said, “I don’t think that faculty see themselves in that role for graduate students, as a mentor. I think I’m almost dreaming...because I don’t know what people expect of that mentor role.” Then Daisy suggested that only some professors choose to mentor and that within any particular institutional setting there are not enough mentors to go around. Thus, while both women believed that the “ideal thing would be wonderful,” they voiced a rhetorical question, “Is there such a thing out there?”

Many of the participants shared a fear of the kinds of reprisals and *political consequences* they might encounter as a result of ending a mentoring relationship. Even though Meredith chose to leave her mentor, she acknowledged that she “was worried about the repercussions this move would have in the field.” Diane also faced a similar situation in which she had to inform a mentor that she no longer wished this person to serve on her committee. Diane stated, “There were repercussions, because at one point I was part of a community and then all of a sudden I had absolutely no contact with anybody else. It was like I was out of the loop for everything.” She was afraid to express herself, as he might offend someone, and she was concerned about getting herself politically marked. Samantha agreed, sharing her beliefs in a statement about changing mentors that implied rather drastic action: “It [changing mentors] would just crucify me.” The women seemed to wish for a relationship between equals, one in which mentors shared power with, rather than imposed their power over their mentees.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

### **The Influences of Context and Positioning on the Co-Construction of Knowledge about Mentoring**

In some ways, focus groups are always unnatural social settings, because they are created and facilitated by the researcher (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, the focus group method has evident limitations embedded within it. For example, we asked our participants to share their experiences with mentoring, resulting in a series of interactions that were characterized by knowledge exchanges, most often framed as statements of fact. Therefore, as our analysis revealed, not all speech functions were present, which, in turn, influenced the grammatical mood. However, in spite of these limitations, the predominantly declarative mood was often implicitly evaluative, as our participants couched their responses to each other, as well as to the facilitator, as hortatory reports, factual statements that implied evaluation (see Fairclough, 2003). In this way, the group discussions provided evidence about the similarities and differences in our participants’ opinions and experiences, and participants were able to move from a simple recitation of the facts of their experience to forming opinions about effective mentoring. For example, both Mary and Diane believed that a good mentor was a professor who was considered an



expert in his or her field of study (referring to a career function), while Samantha, expressed a preference for a mentor who was concerned with her well being and provided the emotional support she needed (referring to a psychosocial function). Through dialogue, the students negotiated a better-defined, more complex understanding of mentoring that considered the varying perspectives of individual group members.

Additionally, our focus groups were composed of homogeneous strangers as Morgan (1997) suggested. The first focus group was composed of five women who were not acquainted with each other. Their interactions were polite and they took turns sharing their experiences and understandings of mentoring, which were often simply a repetition of what they had related in individual interviews, rather than the kind of transformative reflections that would have encouraged the participants to interpret their experiences differently and possibly reshape their understandings. Many scholars suggest that reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others, (Brookfield, 1995; Dewey, 1933; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Schön, 1987), thus focus groups would seem to be an ideal way in which to encourage reflection in these novice practitioners. However, the interactions between our study participants were relatively limited and they took place at a surface level, lacking in-depth negotiation and co-construction of meaning. The participants' main concerns reflected their personal experiences and agenda. The women tended to accept, rather than to challenge the experiences of their peers and to find and share their similarities, rather than to negotiate the differences among their individual experiences. This led to a more cohesive, rather than a disrupted understanding of the mentoring they had received. The dialogue may have been more transformative if the participants had engaged in a more critical reflection, questioning each other in order to consider and critique the multiple interpretations of the mentoring they had received, as well as the multiple ways in which their mentoring relationships might have developed and evolved.

As a result of these limitations, future research might be conducted in other contexts, with other women, as well as with men in order to study more closely the processes of transformation that might be enabled through focus group interactions. Furthermore, it would be important to investigate the perceptions of mentors and to study the discursive interactions between relational dyads. It would also be interesting to study how specific disciplinary discourses might influence the mentoring relationships that develop and to investigate the perceptions of the participants within these situated mentorships regarding their effectiveness. Finally, it would be interesting to explore how multiple meetings of the focus groups might influence the nature of the participants' interactions, collaboration, critical reflection, and exploration of their differences as the co-constructed knowledge about effective mentoring. We wondered why these women tended to accept the differences expressed, rather than to argue or highlight them. How might multiple meetings of the focus groups have enabled participants to reflect and to become aware of and even change the ways in which they positioned themselves?

This concept of positioning influenced our interpretations and analytical meaning making with regard to the ways in which our participants brought their unique subjectivities, relational histories, values, beliefs, and life experiences to the focus group dialogue, which, in turn, affected their subjectivities and the roles they assumed during the group interactions. The positioning enacted by each of our individual participants illustrated the "discursive practices whereby people are located in conversations as

observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37). Moreover, because our participants’ positioning influenced each individual’s contribution (see also Janis, 1982), the very context of the interview shaped the stories the participants chose to share and the way in which the stories were told (Morgan, 1997). Generally speaking, the women who participated in our focus groups exhibited conformity and avoided positioning themselves in ways that would create polarization among them.

Simply by virtue of their participation in the focus group interview, the women were positioned as research subjects whose experiences, specifically those that were problematic, were of interest to the researchers. For example, Daisy and Diane immediately positioned themselves as relatively new to their doctoral programs and somewhat hesitant about the value of what they might contribute to the discussion. In contrast Meredith, who was the only student in her group not enrolled in the College of Education, and Yvonne, who did not have a previous relationship with the other two women in her group, were positioned as “outsiders” in their respective focus groups.

Initially, these positionings affected the groups’ dynamics with the participants addressing most of their responses to the facilitator, and it took some time before they addressed their comments to each other. The facilitator joined in the conversation by occasionally asking the participants to elaborate, redirecting the conversation back to the topic when necessary, or providing information related to participants’ inquiries. For example, when the women were discussing the possibilities of finding an ideal mentor, Mary wondered whether a professor’s contract specified that he/she must serve as a mentor. The facilitator related that mentoring was contractually included under teaching, which led Mary to suggest that because of this stipulation, some professors might consider mentoring an imposition. Ultimately, the facilitator positioned all the participants as experts, soliciting their advice about the nature of good mentors and the characteristics of effective mentoring. Thus the women were able to collaboratively construct a more multi-faceted and realistic understanding of the mentoring they would like to receive.

Finally, our participants constructed and transformed their understandings of mentoring as a relationship that is created to benefit both partners. According to Ann and Daisy, “mentorship is about goodness of fit... it’s about people clicking,” and the dialectical interactions of our participants highlighted the fact that mentoring is about the development and evolution of a particular and situated mentorship, one in which the participants assume various roles and responsibilities. Indeed, the relational responsibilities of the partners are “a dialogic process with two transformative functions: first in transforming the interlocutors’ understanding of the action [or experience] in question and second, in altering the relations among the interlocutors themselves” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 5). As Ann and Daisy suggested, “mentors are pretty special people,” who understand relationships as particular and situated social constructions that are continually negotiated and are sometimes transformed into unexpected, dynamic, and interpersonal forms that shape the powerful and influential dialogues between mentors and mentees.

Moreover, our participants agreed that it was imperative for both mentor and mentee to make their expectations for mentoring transparent as they entered into any relationship. Perhaps mentoring workshops or courses related to relationship building

and conflict negotiation could be developed to support professors and students in developing effective relationships. Several of our participants also shared the difficulties they encountered in finding mentors who shared their interests. Possibly more attention should be paid when recruiting graduate students in order to promote a good match between mentor and mentee. Indeed, faculty and students alike should consider cultivating numerous relationships in order to meet the multiplicity of their specific needs, and students might also consider developing mentoring relationships among their peers in order to address some of their personal, as well as professional needs. Finally, if mentoring is considered an important aspect of socializing students into disciplines and research practices, and assisting faculty members in their research and publication processes, then universities need to provide faculty mentors with the necessary time and resources contractually, rather than subsuming mentoring within other faculty responsibilities.

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