Deepening Roots: Building a Task-Centered Peer Mentoring Community

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The article describes a task-centered, peer-mentoring (TCPM) group initiated by a group of female junior faculty to support one another toward tenure and work/ life balance. It describes a qualitative study that investigated the peer-mentoring experiences of the participants and explored the implications and complications of peer-mentoring relationships for women in academia. The article begins by describing the group's formation in the context of literature that highlights challenges faced by untenured female faculty; next, it describes the task-centered group process and offers a theoretical framework based on feminist pedagogy. The results of the study and implications for further research and peer-mentoring practice in higher education are presented.

Keywords: female academicians / feminist pedagogy / peer mentoring / task-centered practice / untenured female faculty

Introduction

The culture of academia has been described as less than hospitable to women as we attempt to navigate the various aspects of our work and personal lives (Gibson 2006; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2007; Wolf-Wendel and Ward 2006). Women struggle to balance multiple roles and meet tenure expectations at all types of universities (Ropers-Huilman, 2000, 2003; Wilson 2005, 2006a). In comparison to our counterparts who are male, female academics are paid less, undergo a longer promotion timeline, and are tenured more slowly and less often

(Valian 1999). Despite the fact that women currently earn more than half of all PhDs conferred in the United States, we still represent a distinct minority of tenured and tenure-track faculty members (Wilson 2006b). These gender differences suggest particular challenges to women in the academy, especially as we enter the profession and attempt to establish ourselves as productive scholars.

Helping female scholars negotiate the challenges of academia requires more and distinct mentoring than typical university programs provide (if, in fact, such programs even exist). This article describes a qualitative study that investigated the peer-mentoring experiences of a group of female junior faculty who came together to provide support and accountability to one another for scholarly productivity and work/life balance. We begin by telling the story of how our group was formed to illustrate how academia poses unique challenges to untenured female faculty. In this introductory section, we use the first-person "I" voice to represent the individual experience of one of the authors who acted as the group's founder. We then resume the "we" voice, which represents shared experiences or viewpoints, as "I" became "we." Next, we offer a theoretical framework for peer-mentoring practice based on feminist pedagogy and task-centered theory, followed by a description of the research methodology we used to study our own experiences. Finally, the results of the study are presented and the implications and complications of peer-mentoring relationships for women in academia are explored.

Planting the Seeds: How We Came Together

The following narrative, written by one group member, describes the context and origins of the group:

> Before coming to my current university, I spent several years on the faculty at a Research I university. I started that job, had my first child, and moved into a new house in a new city all within six months' time. The tenure expectations were very clear and extremely rigorous. I was assigned two mentors, both older men with grown children. In this context, "mentoring" often consisted of constantly reiterating the expectations. The problem with this type of mentoring was that I perfectly understood the expectations, but when I compared the expectations to the reality of my life as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, teacher, advisor, mentor, and scholar, things did not add up. Academic work hours and spaces are porous and constantly shifting. Drawing boundaries around work that has no clearly defined place, time, or end point can be difficult amid competing life commitments (Park 1996). The more the expectations were reiterated, the more panic ensued.
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> This panic was intensified by an institutional definition of *scholarship* that failed to acknowledge much of the character of academic work. Each month, for example, faculty were required to submit a report that cataloged

their scholarly "products" for the month. Products were completed end results like published articles, conference presentations, or funded grants. However, "research" and "scholarship" are broad terms that refer to many tedious, unacknowledged, and solitary steps—intermediary steps particularly relevant in the early stages of one's academic career. Although I was engaged in many of these steps, as well as in hours of advising, mentoring, and other service work, none of that counted.

My early experiences in academia are reflected in the literature, which notes that most U.S. institutions engage in mentoring models that appear to complement men's gender-role socialization experiences and a "sprint" model of career advancement. Based on the traditional male life-cycle, this model assumes early and intense devotion to one's career, freedom from competing responsibilities, and minimized family time (Drago and Colbeck 2003; Hesse-Biber and Carter 2000). Significant differences exist in the way male and female professors spend their academic work hours—differences that are exacerbated by the presence of children (Suitor, Mecom, and Feld 2001). Male professors with children spend more than twice as many hours per week on research (ibid.) and are 38 percent more likely to obtain tenure than their female counterparts (Kerber 2005). These differences in expectations and experiences can raise conflicts in senior-male-to-junior female mentoring arrangements (McCormick 1991). Finding appropriate female mentors can also be challenging. A majority of academic women interviewed by Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) lacked role models who led a life that included young children, so that they found themselves in new territory when it came to managing work and family as faculty members.

When I left the Research I university it was in large part to rebalance my work/life priorities. My current university recently transitioned to what might be termed a "striving comprehensive" university: That is, a campus in a state of flux with unclear work norms for faculty (502). At this university, an unofficial rule of thumb divides faculty responsibilities into 40 percent teaching, 40 percent scholarship, and 20 percent service. Thus, in addition to maintaining excellence in pedagogy and service, faculty are urged to publish research articles in scholarly journals, develop an independent line of research, and disseminate their work to a national audience. In this environment, the tenure demands seemed, in some ways, more intense than at the Research I university. For faculty at striving comprehensive campuses that are upwardly mobile, combining work and family can be tenuous given never-ending demands to be "all things to all people" (511).

Soon after joining this university, I was sitting in a faculty meeting listening to an untenured female junior faculty member present about her research program. She got to the end and said: "Some days it goes really well and some days my daughter is sick and nothing gets done. I guess that's just where I'm at right now!" Then she threw up her hands. I felt grateful that someone had

finally voiced the predicament that so many untenured women face. To outside observers, we appear to "have it all": we have PhDs, which gives us a degree of professional and social legitimacy that few women achieve; we also have jobs with a very flexible schedule that enable us to devote extended time to family and friends—or so it seems. The day after the faculty meeting, I sent an e-mail to five untenured female colleagues and asked them to form a peer-mentoring group. Our group was comprised of six female tenure-track assistant professors, from different departments within the university's College of Education, with disparate research interests and background. The formation of our group was premised on our similar location in the tenure stream (at the time the group was established we were all untenured assistant professors), as well as a mutual recognition of the challenges we face, specifically: The need for responsive, contextually based mentoring; the incremental nature of academic work; the absence of clear boundaries or expectations for scholarship; and the need for balance and freedom to pursue fulfilling personal, as well as professional lives.

Research Context and Group Process

Our group included six female tenure-track assistant professors at a large state university in the Northeast. As illustrated in table 1 at the end of this article, we were from different departments within the university's College of Education and represented diverse racial/ethnic/religious backgrounds, with disparate family configurations (that is, single, married, single parent, married parents) and a broad range of research interests.

Our group met once a month for one to two hours beginning in January 2006. We met in a conference room in our building. Each month, a different member took on the role of facilitator and another one provided food. The group's name—"POMC," or "Product of the Month Club"—denotes its initial purpose and focus: To provide support and accountability for the completion of scholarly products. One hour of each monthly meeting was devoted to task-centered peer mentoring (TCPM). The TCPM process involved a sequence of steps, as described in table 2 at the end of this article.

Task-centered practice—a prominent, research-based social-work practice model (Garvin, Reid, and Epstein 1976; Reid 1992, 1997; Reid and Epstein 1972; Tolson, Reid, and Garvin 1994)—promotes a structured, iterative process that emphasizes the reflective capacities of problem identification, problem solving, and reflection, but with a fundamental difference: The use of tasks. Tasks are statements phrased in action-oriented terms of precisely what will occur between meetings. On the surface, tasks may look like any "to do" list; however, change-oriented psychological functions are assigned to tasks (that is, taking direct action, learning by doing, becoming aware of limitations, overcoming obstacles). By assuming that people can act successfully to solve a wide range of problems, task-centered models attempt to stimulate and structure individuals' natural

resourcefulness in problem solving. As untenured female faculty struggling to balance multiple roles in our personal and professional lives, task-centered practice was intended to strengthen general functioning and the ability to cope with the complexities of academic work. Using task-centered practice from the outset was also a strategy to help assure ourselves that our goals of productivity and accountability would be achieved. With these goals in mind, each group member took a turn describing their progress toward completing their tasks over the previous month and setting new goals for the following month. Part of this description involved naming obstacles and co-constructing potential solutions. In this way, we were able to discuss the challenges involved in maintaining productivity and work/life balance.

Although task-centered practice generates *individuals'* capacity for problem-solving action, there is also an extensive research literature on task-centered group work (for example, Garvin, Reid, and Epstein 1976; Kilgore 1995; Pomeroy, Rubin, and Walker 1995; Raushi 1994; Scharlach 1985). The nature of group interaction dictates that group members fulfill purposes beyond individual achievement of tasks, such as cohesiveness, the pattern of relationships among members, group processes, shared beliefs, traditions or culture that the group develops, division of labor, and phases through which the group proceeds. Although POMC was formed with the intention of accommodating insti-tutional demands for scholarly productivity (that is, "survival"), these other purposes became instrumental to the group's development and functioning.

Theoretical Framework

Research has framed the presence of female gender "role stress" as of particular concern for newer and female faculty (Fong and Amatea 1992). Role stress describes the psychological impact for professional women balancing mul-tiple roles in male-dominated environments. Stressors include maternal role demands, work vulnerability, perceived role expectations and role conflicts, and personal resources (Gillespie and Eisler 1992). Amatea and Fong (1991) explored the contributions of role stressors and personal resources in predict-ing the strain symptoms of 117 female academicians. They found women who occupied a greater number of roles, but those who experienced higher levels of personal control and social support reported lower levels of strain symptoms. This finding underscores the need for mentoring that acknowledges the distinct role of stressors associated with academic work and provides models for grappling with gender-role stress and achieving role fulfillment in both the professional and personal domains.

Task-centered models have their conceptual roots in feminist pedagogy, which challenges traditional, masculine values of hierarchy, competition, and objectivity by emphasizing the importance of cooperative, caring, nonhierarchi-cal relationships for learning and development (Maher 1999; Noddings 1995). The

practices that flow from feminist pedagogy center on connection, involving participants in the co-construction of knowledge, self-reflection, and self-revelation (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986). A feminist approach to peer mentoring rejects the view of the "disembodied intellectual" by attending to academics' familial, personal, and emotional needs (Collins 2000). As such, the multiple roles of the mentor in supporting women's adult development include leading/guiding, listening/questioning/connecting, and being an ally/sister learner (Bloom 1995). As new faculty with teaching and service demands that seize our immediate attention, and as women playing multiple high-demand roles like partner/spouse, mother, daughter, sister, friend, and mentor, it is all too common that we steal time from our own scholarship and self-care to meet the pressing obligations in our daily lives (Suitor, Mecom, and Feld 2001).

Feminist pedagogy has been defined in many different ways (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986; Boxer 1998; Fisher 2001; hooks 1989; Maher and Tetreault 1994; Ropers-Huilman 1998); however, there is no generic feminist pedagogy. The feminist pedagogy of our peer-mentoring practice is one that is informed by caring relations, defined by Noddings (1992) as those marked by responsiveness, reciprocity, and dialogue. We acknowledge that caring for one another's work and ideas involves caring for the lives that influence and inform our work. We strongly believe that a commitment to caring relations enhances our abilities as scholars and as teachers, mentors, and role models, particularly for young women.

Inherent in this commitment is the recognition that our identities involve a complex series of negotiations and struggles. These multiple identities define how we want and intend to practice. As untenured female scholars, we feel the need to conform to institutional demands for research productivity. Although these are prescribed by the institution, we cannot claim that such demands are exclusively externally dictated; we also hold a deep personal value for advancing our scholarly work. However, we also share a common commitment to achieving this end without fully assimilating into the hierarchical, competitive networks and mindsets that dominate academia, or adopting extreme coping techniques that rob time and energy from our other deeply valued roles outside the academy. While we did not seek to challenge the nature of the tenure-track system, we did want to support one another in finding practical ways to thrive. Therefore the following research question framed our study: What aspects of task-centered peer mentoring were most salient for promoting scholarly productivity and work/life balance?

Method

Since the main objective of this study was to describe our experiences with TCPM in detail, qualitative research methods were chosen. From the beginning of our group's formation, we decided to audiotape our meetings, with the

explicit agreement that we would study and write about our group process at some point in the future. We began this process intensively at the beginning of our second year together. At this point, we began to devote one hour of each meeting to construction and reflection of tasks, and the second hour to self-study. It was anticipated that a qualitative approach would capture our opinions and reactions in all of their complexity. Qualitative methods are best suited to the exploration of emergent processes that are not yet encompassed by theory (Creswell 2006). Luke and Gore (1992) acknowledged that the focus of feminist qualitative research is to move beyond the deconstruction of the dominant position and give voice to marginalized groups, including women. In so doing, feminists pursue the work of social justice. Confirming this belief, we sought the opportunity created by qualitative research to reflect upon our work and engage in action and further analysis, resulting in further understanding and subsequent change.

Data Sources
The data for this study were collected over the course of twelve monthly meetings between February 2006 and December 2007. Members did not meet during nonteaching months, but maintained e-mail contact throughout this twenty-two-month period. Data sources included TCPM contracts, audio-taped recordings of our meetings, and participants' written reflections. Once a month, each group member filled out the task contract described in table 1. The task contracts were used to record immediate goals for our scholarly work and as a guide to reflection on what had been accomplished and discussed as a group. Each group member took a turn describing her work over the previous month and setting goals for the next meeting. These sheets were e-mailed to a group member who volunteered to serve as archivist and kept them in a computer file until the time of data analysis. We taped all meetings and kept an archive of dated tapes for later coding and analysis.

After eighteen months of meeting together, we developed an open-ended question guide for individual reflections about our group process. One member of the group drafted a structure, which was then passed from member to member for feedback and additions. After we had revised and agreed on the questions to be included, each participant independently completed a written reflection that included responses to the following questions:

- Write a few comments about your experience in POMC thus far. How is this group different from other forms of mentoring/support you have received?
- How does it differ in content, strategy, feeling, value, and so on?
- What things from other experiences (either academic or otherwise) would you recommend that we adopt?
- So far, what do you like about POMC (address structural, intellectual, strategic, social, and other aspects)?

- Right now, what do you dislike/wish could be changed about POMC?
- Describe your participation in POMC over the last year in terms of the effort, seriousness with which you have approached the work, contributions to large group discussions, work in small groups, demeanor, active engagement, and so on. Do you think your peers would describe your participation in a similar way?
- What steps could be taken to improve/change your contribution to the group culture?

All completed reflection documents were circulated electronically among members.

Data Analysis
Analysis of recorded conversations and written reflections was intended to discover and describe how we "struggled with ideas and practices" (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001, 19). We listened to all tapes and transcribed salient sections for analysis. Then we developed a set of common codes for analyzing both audio-taped meetings and written reflections following recommendations for team-based qualitative analysis by MacQueen, McLelland, Kay, and Milstein (1998). All participants contributed to the creation and development of the codebook. A preliminary code list was created from theoretical constructs that support the TCPM process. As a group, we defined the codes with examples, and subsequently refined, added, and deleted codes.

Once the codebook was established, we conducted a group-coding exercise in which all members together coded selected transcribed quotes from the audio-taped meetings. This allowed us to develop a shared experience applying the codes, and we made explicit the criteria and rationale for each coding decision. Following the group coding, we completed independent assignments to apply codes to each audio-taped meeting or written reflection. To ensure coding reliability, two colleagues independently coded each data source and then met to compare codes. When codes for a particular response did not agree, the data was reread and discussed until agreement was reached. As a result, several responses were recoded. Initial disagreement on codes was found in only 7 percent of all coding instances (that is, 93 percent agreement). Codes that did not work were eliminated, and problematic code definitions were collaboratively reworded. Also, we identified single responses that were unique and significant, but could not be coded by using broad patterns and themes; therefore a single generic code (that is, "unique") was designed to capture all such idiosyncratic responses.

We analyzed the coded data using the constant comparative method (Glazer and Strauss 1967). Constant comparative analysis requires comparing data to developing categories of responses that emerge during the data-coding process. We wrote memos, consisting of questions and speculations about the data that emerged as codes were sorted and compared, to document and

enhance the analytic process. Codes and categories were sorted and compared until analysis produced no new codes, and when all of the data were included in the codes. We also created higher-order codes (that is, code categories) to represent the multidimensional themes in our work. Table 3 presents the codes and their higher-order categories, definitions, and examples of each code from either the audiotape transcriptions or written reflections.

Results

Examination of the qualitative data revealed a detailed picture of the group's formation and process, participants' conceptualizations of the group's value, and its importance for scholarly productivity and work/life balance, as well as facets of the group's growth and evolution. The group served some common purposes for all members, and also met different needs for individual group members. This article focuses on the important common goals of the group: Namely, promoting scholarly productivity and work/life balance. Analysis revealed that two aspects of our peer-mentoring practice were particularly valuable for achieving those functions. These are represented by two higher-order codes: Strategic support and sisterhood. These two higher-order categories and the codes within are discussed in detail below. Definitions, as well as examples of when to use and when not to use the codes, are included in table 3 at the end of this article. Although discussed separately in the following section, we acknowledge that there is sometimes considerable overlap. For example, the code "reinforcement and modeling" refers to specific instances of transparency in meeting challenges, celebration, and acknowledgment. However, reinforcement and modeling might also be evident in a way that a group member juggled roles. We believe that separating out these categories helped us to be explicit about what the specific functions of the group were for advancing our scholarly goals.

Strategic Support Code
Themes that emerged under the code "strategic support" were: Juggling roles, professional strategies, and goodness of fit. These themes related specifically to our ability to successfully negotiate demands, both personal and professional, and to learn from one another's experiences. Juggling roles referred to the strains and challenges involved in setting and managing personal and professional priorities (for example, mother vs. scholar, scholar vs. teacher, wife vs. mother, and so on). In contrast to other peer-mentoring groups that may reinforce or accentuate competition among members, we consciously affirmed one another's efforts to manage competing demands. In an environment that consistently demands more, we were able to reinforce one another for making choices that preserved our commitment to a work/life balance.

One member spoke about her challenge with work/life issues: "and sometimes it's more work/life balance issues—things like what are reasonable

expectations for when and how much we work and when other needs like family and self-care come first, how to make time for self-care in the face of ceaseless demands, etc." (Amanda B., POMC). Because she openly voiced these challenges, we were able to acknowledge her struggle and provide positive reinforcement for her commitment to family and self-care. For one of us, this support resulted in taking a second semester of maternity leave before tenure, a decision she believes she made partially because the issue of juggling roles was brought to the foreground of conversations. Noddings's (2002) work on caring emphasizes that in caring, "we are receptive; we are attentive in a special way" (13). This attentiveness provides benefits for both the caregiver and the receiver—it is a form of mentoring "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (Noddings 1984, 2).

Often, the opportunity to strategize with peers allowed us to sustain our achievement orientation without sacrificing or curtailing our personal commitments. Although this is a sensitive and often frustrating effort, juggling roles does not mean venting our frustrations; rather, group meetings provided an opportunity to present concerns and engage in collaborative problem solving:

> I think it's been helpful to talk candidly about navigating the promotion and tenure system, the politics, and life strategies. There is also more validation and affirmation in this group than others, by which I mean people are willing to be honest about what we do and don't accomplish and it is quite reassuring to hear of others' challenges and compromises. I also think having a place to just give voice to some of the challenges and multiple demands we are facing is very helpful. To be able to say some things aloud and hear how they sound and to get authentic responses is helpful. (Tiffany B., POMC)

As the group continued to evolve and we validated one another's professional and personal struggles, our process informed our decisions about when it was necessary to be compliant and when it was appropriate to resist the system. Within the group, we perceived this as a way to "ante up" with one another in terms of being willing to resist, prioritizing balance, naming our challenges publicly, reining one another in if tempted to take on too much, and not "selling out" or giving over to unreasonable institutional demands when it was not in our personal and professional best interests. Making collaborative decisions about when to be compliant and when to resist gave us a sense of agency in a system that we perceived as ambiguous and without appropriate margins. For example, we often noted an imbalance between what we were asked to give in terms of time and energy and what we received in return. This imbalance has been noted in previous studies of female faculty (Ropers-Huilman 1998). Within our group discourse, we often found ourselves asking questions like: What will this (committee, research project, course, workshop, and so) add? What will I have to sacrifice in order to take this on? Does it fit with my personal and/or professional goals? Asking these questions among our peers helped us to develop

internal mechanisms for weighing such decisions in a rational and productive way. A second theme identified under strategic support was professional strategies, which referred to sharing strategies for scholarship and professional development (for example, article placement, professional presentations, numbers of articles, logistics, prioritizing, and so on). In contrast to juggling roles, this theme was about strategies for work completion:

> The good part is that I'm not disgusted and exhausted with my data yet so I can still do something. The bad part is that I'm running out of data so I have to go out and get more, which is fine—that's in the works. . . . I don't know how much I can squeeze out of what I have. I potentially can still get two more . . . but I'm running out of ways to be creative at this point about putting the literature review together and the discussion section. . . . the data is similar but the two papers, my overall model and my current model, look nothing alike because of course the data is different for girls. (Pauline G.-R., POMC)

Part of being able to juggle multiple roles and continue to do the work we care about is being strategic about our research and publishing. We challenged one another to find approaches that would maximize our productivity, particularly pre-tenure, while remaining focused on our larger goals for our work. Sometimes this meant finding ways to mine data for more publications before moving on to a new project; at other times it meant helping one another evaluate competing academic demands, such as nominations for discipline-related service activities or requests for collaboration on scholarly work that does not count toward tenure. These opportunities were often complicated by power differentials between the requester and the POMC member. We found that part of supporting one another included helping decipher the political and relationship dynamics involved, thinking through the likely ramifications of declining invitations and developing or framing responses.

Professional strategizing served a number of purposes. For some, it provided new avenues of attack: "It helps to re-think my own strategies and bring about new ways of thinking about approaching things" (Emily K., POMC). It helped others to stay focused on their research priorities: "In POMC, I feel freer in that it is really about accomplishing my own agenda with the ability to modify that agenda as I learn and develop" (Tiffany B., POMC). It also helped increase self-efficacy for saying no to excessive time demands and helped challenge norms around acquiescing to such demands. There is a sense of empowerment in being able to be proactive about choosing research projects that are both of value and serve to advance our research trajectories.

Finally, the third theme of strategic support was goodness of fit, which referred to the conflicts between the espoused values of our institution and individual disciplines and the enactment of those values. For example, we sometimes experienced tension between our needs for logistical and technological support and the budgetary constraints and demand for deliverables at our public

institution. As noted above, ours is a striving university in transition, and, at times, the increasing demands for research and scholarship may outpace the level of resources and infrastructure that are currently available. We tried to help one another strategize about how to mobilize resources within an evolving infrastructure.

Goodness of fit also refers to the alignment between institutional policy and practice. We frequently used our group to explore questions or concerns about reappointment, tenure, and promotion policies in this developing research environment. As one member wrote in her reflection: "We have also wrestled with gaining a better understanding of the complexities and intricacies of life in academia. This experience has helped keep me grounded and better able to separate fact from folklore" (Pauline G.-R., POMC). We acknowledged the complicated realities of all academic jobs, but particularly those at a comprehensive university in flux where anxieties can run high around shifting tenure requirements.

As the extant literature illustrates, women face considerable challenges in the tenure stream compared to their male counterparts. These difficulties may reflect gender differences in the way academics strategize about promotion and tenure. We wanted to build capacity among our female peers to perform, model, and reinforce strategic behavior on our own terms, without conforming to specific expectations of how women should behave in the workplace (for example, in either stereotypically feminine or masculine ways). We were consistently aware of these differences and discussed the uniqueness of collaborative relationships that were productive but noncompetitive. For example, one of our members wrote:

> I wonder if there is something about the way women do work than the way men do work? Are writing strategies gender specific or are they universal? Women have too many unpredictable elements. If you think about it, men are better negotiators. How many of you have had the experience of collaborating with other women in this sort of way? When I was at (another university) there was a way of working where you had to be all about productivity; there was no talk of children and women tended to develop more masculine traits than even men. It was overpowering. What message does that send to the next generation of feminists? (Jennifer G., POMC)

Our experience with peer mentoring suggests that there are successful mentoring alternatives that may increase scholarly productivity without sacrificing the work/life balance that many women crave. We felt that simply by collaborating as women, we were modeling alternatives to those around us. The dean of our college, acknowledging our work, asked us to present our process at a college meeting, and the response we received from fellow faculty members showed significant interest in how they might start similar groups. Through this process, we were able to demonstrate to others the benefits of taking the

initiative, rather than waiting around for outside help and then complaining that it was insufficient or inappropriate. We recognized that we possessed the skills and capacity to help one another and ourselves by crafting ways to address our collective and individual needs.

Sisterhood

Although we originally formed POMC with a primary focus on task-centered practice and peer mentoring, we found, as our group dynamics progressed, that we developed a sense of sisterhood that went beyond mere collegiality. This sisterhood has become one of the most distinctive elements of POMC and thus became its own code category. Two themes were identified under this code: reinforcement and modeling, and community.

The group provided reinforcement and modeling through shared experiences of confronting challenges and the celebration and acknowledgment of one another's successes. We viewed our group process as both authentic and transparent; that is, it reflected the work we were actually doing, we felt safe to openly name professional challenges and concerns, and we talked about ways in which work and personal life intersected. In this way, we challenged the culture of silence surrounding work and family in higher education (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2007), as well as the notion of a gender-blind, disembodied approach to our work lives (Shope 2005), both of which are noted in the literature as challenging to female academics. In contrast to an academic environment characterized by competition and concealment of perceived weaknesses, we cultivated a culture of unconditional positive regard. Being able to express ourselves with our peers in a trusting, open environment helped diffuse competition and build mutual support and care. But the reinforcement went beyond enthusiastic responses to our professional victories:

> With POMC, I feel like I'm controlling my own destiny rather than relying on others, which made me feel very powerless and helpless. I like the feeling of forward momentum and accountability that results from setting goals and sharing them. I love hearing other women talk about their work, because even if I don't completely understand it, it takes me out of my "world" for a bit and helps me frame things with a wider lens than usual. Obviously, the feeling and value are very different, because I actually care immensely about the members as people. (Jennifer G., POMC)

Our written reflections and the data-analysis process highlighted the extent to which we drew strength from our individual tasks and accomplishments, as well as from other members' achievements. The sense of belonging to a sisterhood made up of accomplished women helped each one of us to feel more accomplished, providing a positive reinforcement cycle around scholarly success.

A final theme concerned building a sense of community. Several factors contributed to the establishment of a valuable micro-community, some of which

have been discussed above. These included a shared value for scholarship, social conversations and celebrations, references to our personal lives, shared identity in group membership, safety in "venting," and symbolic references. As we examined the data, our group's transition from individuals meeting together to a collective body with a common purpose was notable. Examples of this code were absent from the transcripts of our early meetings and emerged over time. One group member reflected that "there is the important social and personal piece that recognizes that our career doesn't happen in a vacuum and we are whole people. Not only are different aspects of my life acknowledged in the group, but so are different aspects of my personality" (Emily K., POMC). We saw this as evidence of community, because it reflects the way that the group member saw her participation in the community, rather than her individual growth as a scholar.

Although our primary purpose was to support scholarship and work/life balance, the transition to a community was also facilitated by honoring one another's personal and professional life transitions (for example, most notably, two members had babies; our first group member achieved tenure). Being fully acknowledged was part of what allowed us to be productive. We found that occasions when we were able to celebrate aspects of our personal lives reinforced our commitment to one another and to the group. In addition, this group process complemented our professional goals of publishing, writing grants, presenting at conferences, and speaking with authority on our given areas of expertise.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to explore which aspects of our group process were most salient in our journey toward promoting scholarly productivity and work/life balance. Based on our unique experiences as women in academia, we found it necessary to develop innovative ways to achieve success in building our personal and professional lives. We found that strategic support and sisterhood were the critical components in moving us toward our individual goals and our evolution as a group. As it evolved, our group further empowered us to make decisions about when to conform and when to resist the ceaseless demands placed upon us as women faculty members and family members.

There are several implications of this study for our own peer-mentoring work, as well as for the mentoring practice in higher education. This study highlighted the features of TCPM that made our group successful, which allowed us to work within an institutional, hierarchical system, while embracing feminist ways of approaching a work/life balance. Having a feminist perspective or doing feminist research has many meanings (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986; Boxer 1998; Fisher 2001; hooks 1989; Maher and Tetreault 1994; Ropers-Huilman 1998). Our past experiences of traditional mentoring, as highlighted in the story of our group's formation, emphasized the "disembodied intellectual,"

and we sought a mentoring pedagogy that countered this pervasive paradigm (Collins 2000). Working within this theoretical stance, we acknowledged that our position in relation to the dominant group provides us with an idiosyncratic understanding of the reality of academic work (Nielsen 1990). Our interpretation of the data was influenced by our status as untenured female scholars with mentoring needs unique to our particular context. As members of a "striving comprehensive" university we were already working in a transitional environment with evolving tenure demands (Wolf-Wendel and Ward 2006), and we felt unable or unwilling to mold ourselves into Williams's (2000) characterization of the "ideal worker." By creating our own peer-mentoring practice, we acknowledged the existence of multiple truths or realities and provided one another with needed professional and social support (Hayes and Flannery 2000; McGuire and Reger 2003). We framed this work as consistent with that of feminist researchers who view the world as endless stories of different knowledges that may or may not sustain or disrupt the status quo (Harding 1997; Olesen 1994).

This study focused on the first eighteen months of our group's formation, during which we engaged in a quest for meaningful mentoring and social support. During this time, we found that the group not only fulfilled its initial purposes, but also created deep and unexpected feelings of shared positive regard, caring for one another's work and personhood, and mutual empowerment—the "deepening roots" to which we refer in our title. Nonetheless, our data do indicate an emerging struggle with how to properly balance our group's dual purposes: Those that relate to us as individuals and those that relate to the group. Group dynamics are complex, and at different points we found our process challenged by the needs of individuals within the group—what one member identified in her reflection as behavior that allowed her immediate needs to pull the group in a particular direction. At the outset of the group's formation, the purpose was to provide social support for one another at a time when institutional pressures were most salient. As tenure got closer and as we felt more comfortable with our status as scholars, individual priorities moved to the forefront of the group, changing and challenging its culture.

Often in the early stages of development, participants "play" at community; individuals interact with other individuals until an authentic sense of shared community is established (Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth 2001). For us, developing a peer-mentoring community and studying our own practice was driven by a desire for connection—creating a foundation of openness, mutual respect, and caring so that our common positions and challenges could be explored. Perhaps because of the intensity of this phase of our group's development—and our joy in creating such a community—less attention was given to the ways in which our differences were approached, understood, and constructed within the group. Race, ethnicity, parenting status, and religion are among the many factors that made our group diverse. We recognize that these factors also contribute to the diversity of our experiences within the

group, as well as our experiences in academia. Our future research will examine the nuanced experiences of our group members based on these personal and socio-cultural factors.

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Table 1. Participants

Participant	Department	Research interests	Non-academic professional experience
1	Health and Nutrition Sciences	Adolescent health promotion; social environmental aspects of adolescent physical activity and eating patterns; girls' health; behavioral epidemiology	Evaluation consultant on health-promotion projects; member of several health-promotion task forces
2	Family and Child Studies	African American families; adolescent development; gender issues	Caseworker and supervisor of casework staff in the area of foster care and adoption
3	Curriculum and Instruction	Influence of culture, history, and social interactions on emergent-learning designs; technology-mediated teaching and learning; youth technology practices; sociocultural foundations of learning	Team leader for IBM business partner; created professional-development materials and learning partnerships
4	Family and Child Studies	Culturally grounded social-work practice; Latino/a emphasis, educational outcomes, youth substance use and violence prevention	Licensed clinical social worker with practice experience in various settings, including hospitals, partial-care programs, and community-based social-service facilities
5	Curriculum and Teaching	Teacher preparation for inclusive classrooms; teacher cognition; peer mentoring; literacy instruction	Formerly taught second grade in an inclusive, looping team; worked as a professional developer to promote integrated language-arts instruction and effective inclusive teaching practices
6	Curriculum and Teaching	Professional development; school reform; professional communities of practice; urban schools	Formerly taught high school English in a large urban high school; worked as a professional developer to create interdisciplinary curriculum

Table 2. The TCPM Process

Stage	*Activities*
Social stage	Brief welcome/expression of pressing concerns; transition from outside interests to peer-mentoring activities
Task review	Collaborative review of task implementation; peers rate their performance of each task
Target-goals stage	Identify, prioritize, and select up to a maximum of three target goals for direct, targeted scholarly work
Generate tasks	Tasks—actions to be carried out in order to attain goals—are collaboratively identified, prioritized, and selected
Anticipate and negotiate obstacles	Before finalizing task selection, potential challenges to successful task implementation are considered; options for overcoming them are discussed
Contracting	Review selected target goals and tasks and create a written contract

Table 3. Codes, Definitions, and Examples[1]

Code name	Definition	When to use	Example of code in natural language[2]
Code: Strategic Support			
Juggling roles	Supports role negotiation and work/life balance	When people talk about the strains/challenges involved in setting/managing priorities related to personal and professional roles (mother vs. scholar, scholar vs. teacher); affirmation of choices that preserve balance rather than promote achievement	"I've taken on too much and it's the little things that will kill you. It's those twenty-five-minute chunks that eat away at your time." "I need to get things out there need to be productive, because I'm really starting to feel the pressure." "How do I keep myself from going back to that frenzy?" "You did a lot in the beginning, so maybe now you can keep a more rational pace?"
Professional strategies	Sharing strategies for scholarship and professional development	Suggestions for article placement, professional presentations, timing, number of articles, logistics, prioritizing, reappointment strategy, offers to share experiences, teaching-load issues, grading, tests, class preparations, and so on	"So what do you mean 'screen sharing'?" "So it's really cool—we're using a qualitative research package . . . it has four or five windows, case cards, annotations, and our code-list editor, and our transcript and so we've all been doing group coding so as a way to establish the codebook and it's been incredibly rich and the ideas we're coming up with none of us would have come up with on our own. So the idea is that we all look at it so I have it up on my computer and we can log into this site and then I say "share my desktop" and they see my desktop on their monitor and then I can highlight a section and say 'Okay' and then we can talk about this section and then we define the code and it's great."
Goodness of fit	Conflict between the espoused values of the institution and disciplines and enactment/support given to faculty	Noticing and opening up logistical, technological, needs versus budgetary constraints; alignment between policy and practice; clarification of tacit expectations	"There have been times when we have brought to the group some of our concerns regarding the tenure process. These have been moments when we may not necessarily had the answers, but we have rallied our support in a way that has let each person know she is not alone. As a group, we have also wrestled with gaining a better understanding of the complexities and intricacies of life in academia. This experience has helped keep me grounded and better able to separate fact from folklore."

Table 3, continued

Code name	Definition	When to use	Example of code in natural language[2]
Code: Inspiration in the Sisterhood			
Reinforcement and modeling	Provides reinforcement and modeling from colleagues' successes	Promote self-efficacy; diffuse competition through transparency of meeting challenges; celebration and acknowledgment	"I feel so excited just to get this out." "But that's huge!" "I think [the] key for me is how rigorous is the work of my peers. In my dissertation group I was the only one interested in staying in academia. It meant much of what I needed to do was dissimilar from my peers. I appreciate being in a group that is focused on getting to the same place [as] I am."
Sense of community	Creates a valuable micro-community	Shared value for scholarship; social conversations and celebrations; reference to personal lives; shared identity in group membership; safety in "venting"; symbolic references	"It's a safe, trusting, value-free place that encourages hard work and the development of tangible "products" that we can use to further advance our scholarship." "I also appreciate the social aspect—being surrounded by women in similar places who are trying to juggle multiple roles. It has helped me enormously in the last year, while I try to figure out how I'm going to balance being a new mom and a junior faculty member. I feel very cared for and supported in the group. The celebration of my pregnancy meant an enormous amount to me. I think all of our celebrations are really key to building a sense of community and trust."

Notes:

[1]Codebook style adapted from MacQueen, McLelland, Kay, and Milstein (1998).

[2]From both the transcripts of audio-taped POMC meetings and the written reflections of POMC members.