

Chapter 9

WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL MENTORSHIP IN PSYCHOLOGY AND THE ACADEMY: ONE GROUP'S STORIES OF QUILTING AND LIFE

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Introduction

How we choose to mentor and support one another in the profession of psychology and the academy speaks volumes about the values we hold in our chosen practice. This paper highlights the experience of six women who chose to form a professional group based on mutual support, mentorship, and common professional interests. In writing this story, we are both authors and members of this group. Our experience reveals unanticipated individual benefits and a unique shared journey to building a healthy professional community. In addition, the experience described herein offers a positive alternative to the professional climates of academia and clinical practice as they are often experienced and described in literature.

The paper begins with a brief description of the members of our group. This is followed by an abbreviated review outlining literature directly related to some of the common foundations of our group process. Our collective experience is subsequently highlighted through individual writings, a description of the group process, and the research methods used. Common experiences are noted through themes and discussion. Finally, conclusions regarding the experience are drawn.

Who we are

At its inception, the Women in Psychology group comprised six women, aged twenty-four to fifty-five (the average age being thirty-five years). Two members were master's degree graduates, one was a Ph.D. candidate, and two were bachelor's degree graduates. All group members had trained at the same university, though not in the same faculties. At present, of these six members, three are graduate students and three

are chartered psychologists. In terms of employment, two women are private practice psychologists, two women are involved in research, one woman works in parole supervision, and one woman practices as a psychologist in a medical setting.

How the literature relates to our experience

We begin the literature review by highlighting briefly a model of mentorship that shares a vision common to our group ethic. Following this description, literature related to the professional climate of psychology and, more particularly, the academic climate is addressed. In addition, we present developmental models that highlight the need for lifelong professional learning and support. Perhaps unusually, we also include literature that reviews quilt-making, as well as literature that reviews group support. This literature is included because, as a group, we decided to employ quilting in order to facilitate group process and the sharing of individual and common visions in the profession.

Mentorship in psychology

Though we might not have called it that from the outset, mutual mentorship was an ethic that evolved naturally from the beginning of our group meetings. Mentors have been variously defined (*e.g.*, Gray 1998), but a description that resonated well with our group members describes mentors as “those who gently guide the growth of others during various stages of development” (Huang and Lynch 1995, xi). The distinction between mentor and mentoree blurs when we begin to realize that in the teaching/helping relationship, the mentor or teacher not only provides direction but also benefits from the encounter. A cyclical relationship between the mentor and mentoree is formed in which, at various points during the process, the teacher becomes the learner, the learner becomes the teacher (Huang and Lynch 1995). This model of mentorship fit particularly well with our group process: a group formed at the initiative of the members, lacking any formal leader, and functioned as a forum for discussing ongoing career and personal discoveries.

Professional development in psychology

Though our group varied in educational levels and professional experiences, we could all be described as being early in our careers. Well

aware of our relative inexperience, and perhaps still willing to reveal our “growth edges,” it was clear that developing into our careers was an ongoing task before all of us.

Within the literature, counsellor development has been an object of theoretical formulation and research for over thirty-five years. As early as 1964, Hogan made hypotheses regarding the professional development of student counsellors. Since then, several stage models of counselling student development have emerged (*e.g.*, Loganbill, Hardy, and Delworth 1982; Nelson, Johnson, and Thorngren 2000; Stoltenberg and Delworth 1987). In addition, a handful of researchers and clinicians describe professional development beyond counsellor training (*e.g.*, Kottler 1995). Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) identify lifelong professional development issues based on a large qualitative study of counsellors at differing career points. Our group experience supports the notion that career development continues long after graduation. It has been interesting to witness the rich environment that women with various training levels and work experience can provide for one another – a point we address below.

The chilly climate in psychology and the academy

From the inception of the Women and Psychology group meetings, a common theme emerged around overcoming difficult experiences within academic and professional environments. The women in the group had hoped for nurturing, supportive educational environments. Instead, university training was often experienced as harshly competitive, and the climate as unnecessarily aloof. These experiences resonate with research, which highlights the difficulties that women experience while involved in Ph.D. programs, regardless of area of study (Kerlin 1997). In addition, research into the academic experience as described by professors also points to a harsh academic climate. According to Mintz (1994, 77), “[F]ew would dispute that the academy is rife with conflict and contradiction. Conflict is greatly valued in higher education.” Within the field of psychology itself, research highlights the experience of some long-term professors who find the academic environment very difficult (Larsen 1999). Consider the following: “[O]ftentimes, depending on the circumstances as a graduate student, and as a faculty member for that matter, you have to become fully adept at biting bullets. Except that some bullets are too hard for you to bite. You just can’t do it” (Larsen 1999, 102).

The history and meaning of quilting

Carrying the individual legacies of our training and our work experience, seeking a foundation of respect for one another, and with a strong desire to learn to mentor and support, our group embarked on a unique endeavour. We decided to use quilt-making as a way of giving voice to our experiences and our visions, as well as a way of facilitating group process. Though we had only limited awareness of the rich history of women's quilt-making, we were to learn first-hand the potential richness held within the process. Only later did we learn that in pioneer societies, quilting provided rich and often rare occasions to engage in "women's talk" (Horton 2000). Quilt-making also provided women with a means of self-expression and a way to depict the events of their lives (Gunkel 1996). Today, it continues to serve the same purposes. Quilting is a means of depicting one's identity, of revealing pieces of oneself in the choices made about fabric, colour, pattern, and so on (Hilty 1980; Lithgow 1974). On a social dimension, quilts provide insight into the prevailing culture and reflect the times in which they are made (Horton 1985). The same can be said of the quilt created by the Women in Psychology group. As explored below, the quilt reflects our personal views and experiences in psychology. It also makes a collective statement regarding the current atmosphere of the academy and the profession of psychology.

Women in the group context

Previous social research points to the effectiveness of a group such as ours in improving the quality of life for its members through mutual support, voluntary assistance, and the creation of a caring community (Dalton, Elias, and Wandersman 2001). Women's group participation has demonstrated an increase in hope, support, and sisterhood in a number of circumstances as members share information, experiences, and solutions (*e.g.*, Boisevert, Jevne, and Nekolaichuk 1997). Hence, women's group involvement may enhance personal and professional development and growth through the experience of mentorship, support, and connection (Jordan, Surrey, and Kaplan 1991).

The process: Our methodology

While this chapter does not claim the rigours of a full research study because this was not the intention of the group participants, it does evolve

out of a knowledge of feminist research practices (*e.g.*, Richardson 1997) as well as narrative methodology (Polkinghorne 1995). Most notably, the “data,” our stories, are told in our own voices through individual vignettes included in this document. Given the ideographic nature of narrative research methodology and the value that voicing our own experience may have for others, excerpts of four group members’ stories are shared, along with descriptions of their quilt squares. Finally, we do not claim that our experiences, either individually or collectively, represent a universal truth; rather, they represent a way of looking at the world and a way of attempting to place relationship and support within the context of our professional lives.

Our written stories and quilted squares

The four stories and descriptions that follow were written by members of the Women in Psychology group. Each story, in the voice of its author, highlights aspects of the individual group member’s experience and the meaning of that experience for her.

1) *Diane’s story: “Trusting the process” –
Developing and nurturing a women’s talking circle*

I have often been blessed with opportunities to learn important lessons in my life. One of these lessons is about trust, both in myself as a person and in the process of life. To trust that things will unfold as they should has been a struggle for me because I believe in self-determination. The last few years have presented several challenges to further my learning of this lesson.

When I began my journey to graduate school and the career of psychologist, I was filled with hopes and expectations. From the beginning of the master’s program, however, I knew that the path would be very different from the one I had imagined. The support and mentorship that I had hoped for did not materialize. In their place were competition and fear. Students were pitted against one another and faculty did not model the behaviours that I had associated with a profession based on compassion and respect. I coped by keeping to myself and by looking forward to getting out into the “real” world of a psychologist. Once again, I encountered disappointment. The chartering process was more adversarial than supportive. I kept looking for mentors and guides, but they did not appear.

During this experience, I vowed to myself that I would make a difference once I was a psychologist. Following graduation, the Psychologists' Association of Alberta asked me to form a Women in Psychology special interest group. The journey toward forming such a group was initially a rocky one. My doubts were many. Would this kind of group work? How would it work? What would its purpose be? Part of the answer to these questions came unexpectedly from my husband's suggestion that we have the first meeting in our home. Meeting in a comfortable and personal setting fit well with having a flexible and egalitarian approach to forming our women's group. The group slipped easily into a kind of "talking circle" where each member had an equal opportunity to participate and share.

As the group met together over the next months, we developed connections with one another, sharing stories of graduate school, work environments, our profession, and our personal beliefs. We soon decided that our reasons for coming together would include both professional advocacy, specifically around issues affecting women, and personal support. The supportive part has expanded to include a focus on creativity. A few months ago, Denise suggested that we start a quilting project; she had participated in several such projects at a cancer hospital. We eagerly agreed to combine our somewhat limited experience of fabric, needles, thread, and stitch-witchery to express our visions of psychology and the group. I have been continually amazed at the level of focus and absorption, as well as the kind of "by-product" discussions, that quilting has released in our group. It has been an enriching experience and another reminder of what can happen when we trust the process and ourselves. One year ago when this small group of women first met, I would not have imagined that we would connect as we have or that we would put our energies together into the creation of a quilt and a paper.

Reflecting on the past year of our group, I feel gratified with the path we have taken. Something real has resulted from an obscure beginning. And the journey continues. I trusted that the group would form itself and that we would connect in an equal and shared way. I trusted that a group of women could come together and support one another. I have found the mentors and guides I have been looking for all along. I am proud to be where we are today.

Diane's quilt square: The circle of life (and therapy!)

The themes and images in my quilt square are strongly influenced by Aboriginal culture and teachings. The central part of my square shows a

circle, a prominent symbol within Aboriginal culture. To me, the circle is important in that it represents continuity, both in life and in therapy. I believe that there is no strict beginning or end in therapy; it is an ongoing process. The life cycle of a sunflower is depicted in the centre of the circle as a way of symbolizing this continuity. The four female symbols and four red sashes represent the “four directions,” another significant Aboriginal teaching, and I conceptualize these four areas as being the core of all human beings: emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental. Restoring balance is the main goal of psychological intervention.

2) *Linda's story: “Coming home”*

In many ways, the experience of attending the Women in Psychology group reflects my vision of psychology. That first evening, I experienced a feeling of coming home. Although I had never met these women before, I found myself freely listening, talking, and sharing experiences, hopes, and plans. We talked of so many things that resonated with me and that reflected and validated my experience of being a woman in the field of psychology.

How familiar was the awareness of the possible repercussions of being identified as a feminist! It was not just the communicating that was important. It was the honesty, openness, and respect of the communication that made the evening particularly meaningful to me. There was space in the room: space to listen to one another, to share experiences, to plan with excitement and anticipation. We started the quilt at the following meeting and “worked” on our squares while we talked.

After one meeting, I had an experience that highlighted a part of the struggle I felt in being a woman in the field of psychology. I left the meeting feeling very uplifted and strengthened, and as I was driving home, I found myself thinking about how to communicate this experience to the larger psychological community, my colleagues, beyond this group. I also found myself realizing that to communicate the experience in a way that would be valued and accepted by the psychology community at large would change the experience. I would be making the experience fit others’ conceptualizations of psychology rather than showing what the experience was truly like for me. I would have to re-language it, change it to make it presentable, thereby losing its real essence. It would be like fitting a woman’s body into a girdle. This experience has shown me the challenge we, as women, face in contributing to a vision of psychology that authentically reflects our experiences. Coming home is about being

who we are. I believe that there is a freedom in breaking the old mould of psychological expression and thought and stretching into who we know ourselves to be.

Linda's quilt square: Breaking the mould

My piece shows a tree in the shape of the psychology symbol. The similarity between the psychology symbol and the symbol for women is significant in the piece. I chose the symbol of a tree because it is important both personally and professionally to me. For me, the tree is symbol of life, growth, and change. It also symbolizes the six core members of the Women in Psychology group. The six roots represent the rootedness we experience in the group and the support we give to one another. The fiery background reflects the destructiveness of the unsupportive and at times hostile climate for women in graduate school, in the profession of psychology, and in society. The image overall shows the transforming process of going through great difficulty. New shoots of green occur after a forest fire. The tree continues to grow through difficulty. Women in psychology, too, continue to grow through the, at times, destructive ways of the training they get and the professions and society in which they live.

3) *Denise's story: "Sewing a new vision"*

Profound experiences can arise in the most unexpected of circumstances. I held a little bias until not long ago: to my way of thinking, groups were generally for other people. I believed that professional women held the potential for collegiality born of the desire to nurture, but rarely had I actually experienced this first-hand. I wondered why, in a profession based on the desire to help, my experience had so often been tempered with competition and distance.

I admit to healthy scepticism. As I anticipated our first meeting, I wondered whether our commonality as women in psychology would provide enough foundation for connection or a common vision. I hold very strong convictions regarding the importance of mentorship and support in professional development and practice. Secretly, I hoped that this would be a place to discuss my professional hopes and frustrations, excitement and disappointments. I hoped that this would be a place to explore the challenges of putting visions of professional mentorship into practice.

From the beginning, a quiet and powerful energy was present in the group, and in time, compassion grew among us. With the decision to use

creative means, through quilt-making, to articulate our experiences and dreams, the group seemed to turn a corner, and new ways of understanding our own experiences and those of others opened before us. At times, the room rang with laughter. At other times, absorbed in our creations, a respectful silence filled the space. With no direct objective, we found ways to appreciate our commonality and respect our differences through conversation. A part of me was deeply touched that I should have the opportunity to share in the dreams of my women colleagues and that I felt safe enough to share my own visions. Our risks to share as well as support and mentor one another gave birth to community.

I was getting to know my sister-group members much differently than if we had begun with an agenda, a stated goal, or some particular cause for which to lobby. I was proud of the way in which we had acknowledged our experiences and embraced our desire to try to make a difference. The group's journey itself evolved, taking form only as a shared spirit seemed to guide us. On a more personal level, I was learning. Perhaps there was a community for me and perhaps I need not always shield myself with scepticism in the face of offers of support.

Denise's quilt square: Beauty and abundance

This piece represents my view of the beauty and abundance of life. I believe in and sense a growing respect in psychology for holistic approaches to healing mind, body, and spirit, approaches that acknowledge both intellect and intuition. The image of the tree symbolizes natural relational approaches to working with others. In the background, an outdated mechanical device representing mechanistic approaches to our work is superseded by a warmer, gentler, fuller vision of the helping relationship.

4) *Jennifer's story: "Fertile soil to sow seeds of professional support and development"*

When I started university, I was under the impression that female psychology professors were readily available to foster the potential of undergraduate students such as myself. This assumption quickly withered during my undergraduate years, as I learned that such mentoring opportunities rarely presented themselves. Female academics, like exotic plants, were few and far between, and those who did exist did not appear to thrive in conditions conducive to mentoring. This lack of exposure to feminist mentors has led me to perceive the academic climate as arid and barren.

Upon graduation, I became aware of my need to experience a more enriching context, one that would ensure the sowing of seeds of professional support and development. I have found the Women in Psychology group to provide fertile soil for the “blooming” of interests and the “blossoming” of future vocational pursuits. In meetings with these five women, important relationships of mentorship, partnership, and friendship have been planted and tended with care. Our combined quilting efforts have enabled me to see how creative activity may be employed as a means of cultivating professional support and development. A strong sense of community, connection, and compassion was nurtured in our quilting sessions.

Apart from sharing experiences, I realize how together we share a vision of feminist psychology. With each meeting, we have mutually created a space to celebrate achievements, challenge and encourage one another’s potential for growth, and experience collegiality. These five women have taught me that where women gather, there is a rich, relational atmosphere. Like a tree, I have flourished in my chosen field as a result of having found female mentors able to provide those nutrients essential to my growth.

Jennifer’s quilt square: Journeying the landscape

My panel is a landscape of my educational journey in feminist psychology. The primary component of this journey is represented by the stream and two hills: each embodies an educational experience that I have encountered or seek to encounter as I travel toward my destination of feminist psychological practice. The brown hill is symbolic of my undergraduate experience in “patriarchal” psychology. I felt somewhat isolated in my feminist focus as an undergraduate psychology student; this is apparent in the single female symbol and its lone shadow. The green hill embodies my hope to expand this interest in my exposure to feminist psychology as a graduate student. I foresee my ability to relate to and identify with other women in psychology: hence, the multiplicity of female symbols and their connecting shadows.

The stream signifies the role the Women in Psychology group has played in channelling my energies toward my chosen field. Like a stream, the group has an “ebb and flow,” which has served to influence my vision of psychology. My involvement in the group has proven to be a unique learning experience in itself and has enabled me to envision my future as a feminist practitioner in this psychological “landscape.”

Our stories and squares: An analysis of our data

It has been a challenge to identify the many threads that weave through the fabric of our experiences and to construct a framework for communicating the essence of our collective experience. For the purposes of this research analysis, our methods were informed by content analysis techniques as described by Mirriam (1988) and phenomenological thematic techniques as outlined by Moustakas (1994).

In keeping with the overall experience of the Women and Psychology group, the data analysis was collaborative: one group member (J.A. Boisvert), after conducting preliminary analysis of the written narratives, shared her findings and invited feedback from all other group members. The role of other group members in providing feedback was pivotal to understanding the emergent themes and eliciting important additional data from the group.

Our collective experience: Themes and discussion

Compiling and synthesizing the stories revealed unanticipated individual benefits and a unique shared experience in the journey to create a healthy professional community. We found four main interrelated themes as we reviewed our experiences. A key commonality across all four is the power of relationships and caring within the group. With this in mind, the four central themes are the following: (1) mentorship and mutual support; (2) possibilities for change; (3) cool and warm climates; and (4) quilting and creating a vision.

1) Mentorship and mutual support

Together, we established a group environment where each of us could be both teacher and learner (Huang and Lynch 1995), finding opportunities to mutually mentor and enrich one another's lives across differences in education levels and professional experiences. As the trust within the group developed, stories of professional development and the messages that we had each received about our place within the profession began to emerge. The stories often contained the seeds of negative messages about ourselves within the profession, planted at times when we were developing and vulnerable. The potential and real trauma experienced as a result of such professional experiences were revealed, often for the

first time, in the company of others, and we each began to learn that we were not alone.

Reflecting on our experiences, we saw that female mentors were few and far between in academic and professional settings. Indeed, at the outset of the Women in Psychology group, many of us approached the group guardedly. Previous experience had led many of us to question the likelihood that we would find a supportive atmosphere with our professional colleagues. Gratifyingly, our willingness to explore new group mentorship possibilities was rewarded with the opportunity to experience new and healthy ways of being with our women colleagues. Tikker, one of our group members, shares the value of mentorship and natural support: "Within this group of women, I feel that I have at last found the collegiality and mentorship that was so lacking in my journey to become a chartered psychologist."

This theme, a hallmark of our particular group experience, is found in feminist and other psychological literature and research (*e.g.*, Hazler and Carney 1993; Kerlin 1997). Our experience as under/graduate psychology students lacking mentorship and support leads us to hope for better opportunities for women in our field to develop a feminist identity that will enhance professional development and growth.

Several feminist writers have proposed that female identity is relational, suggesting that women experience and understand themselves in relationships and not as separate entities (Belenky *et al.* 1997). By way of example, Kmiec, Crosby, and Worrell (1996), in their chronicle of female faculty collaborating with female undergraduate students, explore the implications of feminist mentorship. As female psychologists, they cite the potential benefit of the mentoring relationship, identifying ways in which it has allowed them to behave in accordance with feminist ideology relative to their individual and collective interests. They thereby attest to the importance of relational and more collegial professional relationships.

2) *Possibilities for change*

The mentorship, support, and encouragement fostered in the group enabled each of us to develop greater trust in our potential to create professional change. The group experience heightened our sense of ourselves as capable of making professional change, of doing things differently from the way we had experienced them. The experience has allowed us to witness one another's successes, be they in graduate work or in the

workplace. Jennifer shares how the group has come to shape her future vision of psychology:

Apart from sharing the experiences, I realize how together we share a vision of feminist psychology. With each meeting, we have mutually created a space to celebrate achievements, challenge and encourage one another's potential for growth, and experience collegiality. We come together to make a significant impact in the profession, be it through teaching, research, or practice.

Feminist research on women's experiences of professional development highlights power hierarchies within academic and professional settings, drawing attention to the need to create a more relational atmosphere in psychology and the academy. Klonis *et al.* (1997), in their explorative study of the link between self-labelled feminist psychology professors, found that feminism, especially in the form of relationships with other women, served as a "life raft." The theme of feminism as a coping device in academia corresponds with our experience of the importance of relationship and its power to effect change within institutions.

3) *Cool and warm climates*

The Women in Psychology group provided a "warmer" and more nurturing climate when compared to our experiences of university settings, which were often found to be cool and competitive (Mintz 1994). Most of us did not feel a sense of warmth or welcoming upon entrance to a graduate program or when embarking on the chartering process. Such "cool" experiences led many of the women in our group to perceive the academic and professional climate in negative terms and to feel thwarted in our attempts to pursue education and training with a feminist focus. As a result, together we describe the group as having become a "safe place" where we can speak openly without fear of reprimand or social reprisal.

As feminists, we pride ourselves in enhancing our academic and professional environments by changing the ways we educate and relate to others with the purpose of "defrosting" these "chilly" climates (Belenky *et al.* 1997; Crawford and Macerek 1989). Amidst alternative methods of creating change, numerous elements of feminist pedagogy have been

identified by women writers and investigators (*e.g.*, Forrest and Rosenberg 1997; Hoffman and Stake 1998). One element in particular, that of the validation of personal experience and development of confidence, is accomplished by encouraging students to consider connections between their subjective realities and formal course content within an atmosphere of respect and support (Forrest and Rosenberg 1997; Maher 1987; Morley 1992; Stake and Hoffman 2000; Weiler 1988). Though not a training group, our group became a space where we were able to speak more freely about our subjective experience and our professional selves.

4) *Quilting and creating a vision*

Throughout our group discussion, quilting was used by group members as a means of expressing experiences and visions of psychology and as a way of facilitating a strong sense of community, connection, and collegiality. While working to put our visions of career and profession into fabric, our conversations focussed on our individual dreams in the profession of psychology.

The fact that quilt-making was traditional women's work was not lost in our conversations. We were acutely aware that we had chosen to participate in an activity unusual for our profession. Yet, rather than diminish the status of our profession, we had the feeling that we were once again pioneers. We explored new ways of seeing ourselves and our futures. We had found a way to surmount the common mistrust and tensions among professionals in psychology, and we had begun to openly discuss our professional past, our passions, and our hopes. In a sense, our foremothers had taught us about community through quilting, and we had found in it a way to make our current work as women healthy and supportive. The themes and images that emerged in the quilt speak to making the personal political. Our pieces stand collectively in the quilt, publicly expressing our individual and professional convictions. Jocelyn tells of the importance of the connections made while quilting in the group: "With each meeting [over the quilt], my spirit feels lighter, my frustrations seem more manageable, and I feel like a happier, healthier person. I feel more capable and stronger in facing the next challenge that arises and take comfort that there are other women near."

In creating our quilt panels, we found that we were in the good company of our foremothers in putting the important aspects of our lives into fabric form (*e.g.*, Miles 1999; Gunkel 1996). We also found ourselves in good company with feminists who have remarked on the presumption

that “if we do cutting edge feminist work, it is not seen as psychology” (Unger 1998, 198–99). In some sense, in bringing the possibility of quilting and other creative endeavours into the professional and academic realms, we were approaching our group from a “cutting-edge” perspective. In fact, it was not simply the message of our experience that became important. The quilt itself was important as a representation and testament to our experience together.

Conclusion

The application of a unique method and, more importantly, the conviction to create a professional haven for mentorship and support gave birth to the unique experiences of the group of psychology students and practitioners described in this paper. In developing our Women in Psychology group, our six group members began by implicitly focussing on relationship, listening, and honouring professional experiences. In the course of our meetings, a series of themes emerged that are consistent with feminist literature addressing issues of mentorship and mutual support in psychology and the academy. The four primary themes presented were mentorship and mutual support, possibilities for change, cool and warm climates, and quilting and creating a vision. Given our positive and powerful group experience, we suggest and hope that others will choose to experiment and play with possibilities for creating wholesome and necessary places for professional growth.