

Comentoring, Collaboration, and Community: Feminist Approaches Within an Australian University

Feminism & Psychology

1–11

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DOI: 10.1177/09593535251382739

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Abstract

McGuire and Reger propose “comentoring” as a feminist innovative challenge to traditional, hierarchical models of mentoring. This commentary reflects on experiences of implementing comentoring among a group of interdisciplinary researchers at a regional Australian university. It emphasises ways personal alignments (development of community), democratic approaches to research, and multiway mentoring practices have been integral to the group’s academic success, collectively and individually. It outlines flow-on effects of this praxis for others (e.g., postgraduate students, early career researchers) encompassed within this group. Finally, this commentary supports and develops McGuire and Reger’s proposal, particularly among minority/priority groups—including academics who identify within multiple intersecting identities—arguing this professional practice model is integral to empowering ethical practice among academics enacting social justice research.

Keywords

academia, community, gender, interdisciplinary, mentoring

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The *Gender Inclusive Practices and Work–Life Balance in Australian Universities* report (Hamilton et al., 2022) observes, postpandemic, that “for women working in the university sector, in research, teaching and as professional staff, the vicissitudes of recent years are compounding the challenges of having a successful career” (p. 15). While women comprise 58.3% of the Australian university sector, most (63%) are Academic Level A/B (Level A corresponds to Associate Lecturer/Research Associate/Postdoctoral Research Fellow, while Level B equates to Lecturer/Research Fellow), and typically employed in teaching-only roles (62.4%; p. 8). Women were disproportionately affected during the COVID-19 pandemic due to additional caretaking responsibilities, thereby completing an “extra shift” after work (Berheide et al., 2022; Naqvi & Russell, 2020; Power, 2020). Thus, it is unsurprising women report feeling marginalised in universities (Hamilton et al., 2022). In response to perceived disempowerment, many academic women exhibit trauma responses (e.g., withdrawing, avoiding, isolating; Barton et al., 2023). Others, like the authors of this paper, foster communal support (Barton et al., 2023).

In this search for others, we overcame the fatigue of isolation and individual self-advocacy. Close professional collaborations developed organically via serendipitous networking, introductions (spontaneous and intentional), and university-related social interactions. Recognising existing synergies, we sought to strengthen individual and collective capacity and collaborate on our own terms, rather than seeking superficial inclusion of others consistent with historical patriarchal practices of academic “empire building.” Instead, we sought to build and nurture a village, leveraging relational capital rather than competition, focusing on awareness rather than recognition, supporting each other to grow interrelated and interdisciplinary programmes of research we each led. Traditional one-to-one mentoring is typically focused on a particular outcome over a particular period, beginning with initiation and cultivation of the pairing and ultimately leading to separation and redefinition of the mentor–mentee relationship (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021, p. 20). Without being aware of it at the time, we were beginning to implement McGuire and Reger’s (2003) feminist model of comentoring. McGuire and Reger (2003) propose comentoring as a counter to traditional hierarchical models of mentoring that are limited in scope and accessibility and beset by power imbalances (p. 54). In contrast, McGuire and Reger’s (2003) comentoring relationship not only “fosters” but relies on “an equal balance of power between participants” (p. 54), allows space for emotion and uncertainty, and encourages and supports rather than critiques. This relationship consists of regular, informal meetings designed to celebrate success, set realistic goals, and maintain research-related momentum (p. 62).

These relationships were strengthened during COVID-19, when companionship was essential. We developed respectful, equal, democratic, and horizontal mentoring relationships within our comentoring group, drawing on our connections regularly, offering reciprocal invitations to join relevant research endeavours wherever possible, and seeking collaboration with our village whenever an opportunity presented. Further, we supported one another through psycho-social stressors (e.g., health issues, pregnancy, parental leave, grief), consistent with feminist relational practices (support, trust, compassion, mutual respect). Such practices are also in line with relational cultural theory in which

all members of the comentoring relationship benefit from personal growth and acceptance of one's own interdependent self-in-relation (Fletcher & Ragins, 2008). This camaraderie allowed individuals and various combinations of researcher subgroups to thrive—particularly as individual contributions may fluctuate depending on circumstances—however, maintaining strong contributions to projects on balance. This was achieved through an explicit acceptance of the ebb and flow of availability and capacity, and that the weightings of our contribution would be balanced in the end, a direct result of the trust we had built as a team. In this sense, within our comentoring relationship, we redefined emotion and personal circumstances as “a source of knowledge and a catalyst for understanding, rather than a distraction from one's academic development” (McGuire & Reger, 2003, p. 55).

Our core community comprises seven academics in southeast Queensland, Australia: feminists, with diverse and intersectional genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and migrant history. While the authors comprise the core community on which this observation is based, we include other scholars within and outside of our university. We acknowledge that our (primarily) White, middle-class backgrounds have fostered privileges within academia, historically not readily extended. These feminists are of similar age, yet diverse in life stages (e.g., caring for young/teenage children, elderly parents, rural properties). Despite their differences, all community members recognise each other through life transitions, knowing this inevitably will be reciprocated. In line with Christou and Janta's (2019) observations on “affecting solidarities,” in which academic connection is “centred around values of generosity, collegiality and the communal, rather than grounded in a model of individual ‘success’ and ‘achievement’” (p. 233), this community is fuelled by empathy and solidarity, with parallels regarding social justice, reflected in personal and professional values and research approach.

Our disciplinary backgrounds span psychology/counselling; social work; literary, cultural, and gender studies; education; creative arts; and sociology, with academic levels ranging from PhD student to professor. These diverse academic and pedagogical backgrounds strengthen our community, as we continually learn from/with each other, building knowledge and applications in new ways. This diversity promotes creative and interdisciplinary research with innovations in subject matter and methodology. Where these backgrounds intersect is in the team's shared interest in social justice and health equity, and in promoting these through academic research. The community's intersectional feminism, as Oliveira-Silva (2023) maintains, is necessary to establishing equity, diversity, and inclusion in a university environment, and exhibited in the feminist perspective we bring to our academic portfolios (research, teaching, service). Through horizontal mentoring, reflective of McGuire and Reger's (2003) conceptualisation of feminist comentoring, which challenges and resists traditional and hierarchical approaches to mentoring, our village pursues an active effort to rise above politics and power. The exercising of collective “everyday feminism” promotes group dynamics that empower members and recognise the emotional labour of university work while making room for our wider lives. This model fosters an institutional environment and shared narrative that gradually weaken cultural and institutional norms and make space for solidarity (Mackay & Hayfield, 2023).

By working together, aligned by these values, we enact strategies of feminist solidarity and collective action; as Sweetman (2013) observes, “social, economic and political change can come from individuals realising their common interest in challenging unequal power relations, and asserting their full and equal rights as members of society” (p. 217), also defined by Scholz (2008) as “solidarity.” According to Varma and Shaban (2024), being part of a community does not necessitate belonging to the same identity group, but rather that communities may form in response to structural conditions that transcend intragroup boundaries. According to Mazak, “institutions of higher education were not intended for womxn [sic] and nonbinary people”—underpinned by the system of “racist, ableist patriarchy” (Mazak, 2022, p. 15). Our horizontal mentoring practices, enacted within community, challenge vertical university institutional hierarchies which typically do not recognise academics from diverse backgrounds (Shen et al., 2022). We work as a community founded on shared personal and professional values, required within changing (in)formal university expectations, yet always prioritising social justice. This community embodies substantive feminist solidarity through tangible horizontal practices of support and inclusion, which offers an antidote to the “invisible and normalised ‘cliques’ of masculinised, middle-class and white academia” (The Res-Sisters, 2016, p. 275). Even as, and perhaps precisely because we do so, we have objectively achieved success above and beyond performance indicators set by the institution. Further, in contrast to “gaming the system,” we have worked together to optimise effort, impact, and outputs through learning from and developing one another. In addition, shared values and passion for creating positive change through building a credible evidence-base to advance academic advocacy sustain such successes within our community.

Case Study: Outcomes of Comentoring

An illustrative example of our feminist comentoring development journey began in April 2020—at the early stages of COVID-19. Through an internal grant, building upon initial work (Phillips et al., 2020), the last author led the opportunity to develop a cross-national project, in partnership with community and government stakeholders, where authors worked with international colleagues, industry partners, and PhD students, mapping intimate transgender citizenship while incarcerated in Australia and the United States (US; Brömdal et al., 2023, 2024). The seed grant (AUD \$13,478) was awarded for work including producing, submitting, and ideally publishing eight manuscripts by August 2021. The team was successful in publishing (at present) 12 manuscripts. This is a key metric in academia. Often, women in academia are not sufficiently mentored, including guidance on how to publish (Cross et al., 2019). Our community thereby overcame this historical problem via our horizontal mentoring and shared knowledge practices.

Our team created a plan based on a social justice ethos of access and participation to assist with forward planning, shared expectations, clarity of roles and contributions towards each output, and equity and fairness for all planned outputs for any collaborative project. We developed a publication plan at the outset of each project, which included

each anticipated paper along with a target journal aligned with the study methodology and the topic readership to maximise potential acceptance and impact. The publication plan also included the lead author for each output, accompanied by a PhD student also hired as a research officer, as well as the identification of which team members were to make a more substantive contribution to a specific assigned section of each manuscript (e.g., findings/results section written by the person who led the analysis; methods section written by the person who was most involved operationally in the project; discussion section including significant input from industry and community partners to maximise translational impact). Interim time frames and projected “due dates” were also included in the plan, which were discussed collaboratively and agreed upon prior by all team contributors.

Significant to this collaborative approach, members were encouraged to take a turn leading specific outputs that more strongly aligned with their interests, methodological strengths, and/or disciplinary/content expertise—and based on a flat or horizontal structure where the leader of the paper was ultimately the lead author, regardless of their position. Accordingly, order of authorship was based on substantive contributions across the entirety of the project and each paper. Graduate students and early career researchers were overtly and actively encouraged and supported to lead papers as part of this process, resulting in around half of the team’s papers being led by more junior academics. Further, the publication team included industry/community contributors (including those with lived/living experiences) as coauthors, which greatly assisted with feasibility, relevancy, fidelity, and impact of the research and outputs, and recognised their meaningful and valuable contributions towards both the project and the output. The concepts highlighted in this section are well illustrated by the recent body of work from our team, which utilised varied methods, novel interdisciplinary approaches, and distinct team member contributions in (co)leading designated papers using empirical and archival datasets regarding challenges, resiliency, and advocacy within a trans carceral health and rights promotion context (du Plessis et al., 2023; Halliwell et al., 2022). This trans carceral health and rights promotion project sought to draw on semistructured interview data with formerly incarcerated trans people from Australia and the US, including archival data in the form of letters one Australian trans woman wrote while incarcerated in two men’s facilities. Collectively, with the help of these data sets, the project sought to offer unique ways of methodologically and theoretically understand how trans people navigate, live, and perform in order to survive carceral realities.

Operationally, this success also instigated a model whereby research assistants and graduate students were matched with one or two academics on manuscripts with different methodological, theoretical and analytical strengths, collectively offering innovative interpretations of the subject (Daken et al., 2024; du Plessis et al., 2023; Halliwell et al., 2022, 2023; Sanders et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2023). This collaborative approach, promoting horizontal/shared leadership among established and junior academics, supported interdisciplinary learning for all members, including new methodologies, analyses, and theoretical approaches. This innovative process had far greater social justice and trans carceral rights and health impact than if we had worked in isolated disciplines, and methodological comfort zones, yet also played to our strengths.

More specifically, as a result of this model and its multisector partnerships, we were invited to deliver trans-affirming professional development sessions to national and international prison staff, including providing policy directives. Our work has been cited by international policy guidelines (Coleman et al., 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2020) and received international awards. The team has contributed to practice-led research outcomes with local and international curators, and to the expansion of research methodologies in the trans carceral space (Mullens et al., 2022).

Next Steps: Building the Future

Moving forward, we aim to continue to utilise feminist comentoring and collaborative approaches across interdisciplinary research contexts to develop future generations of academics within their own communities. We propose a community of practice approach that is based on McGuire and Reger's (2003) model, and supports and develops it by arguing that for comentoring to be effective, it must be underpinned by social justice and advocacy and be committed to elevating and emphasising underrepresented voices. It seeks to foreground lived experience as insights that should be contextually interwoven with academic learning to offer understandings that "dispel the view of the disembodied intellectual by attending to academics' familial, personal, and emotional needs" (McGuire & Reger, 2003, p. 53). We extend our commitment to the latter, as this is where peripheral and untold stories lie—and by their omission, academic narratives are often generalised and out of context, leading to misrepresentation and misunderstanding. We therefore seek to engage with the "embodied intellectual" more fully, taking into account multimodal intelligence (as approaches to research) and insights via experiential, intuitive, creative, psychological, and relational means of experiencing "life moments" entangled with our academic careers. Strangely, academic career development continues to be discussed in abstract ways, often omitting the social ecology and relational components of academic culture (Heffernan, 2021; Hollywood et al., 2020). Our particular application of feminist comentoring makes room for, empowers, and celebrates the whole, and relishes the messy humanness of wider lives rather than ignoring or, worse, punishing the impact our lives may have on our academic contributions.

Further, relational aspects in academia are undermined by a professional work culture, while serving as one of the most frequent academic concerns regarding why employees stay in or leave university educational environments (e.g., perceived support, maintaining work–life balance; Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). While recent discourses such as "kindness" present an acknowledgement of a relational emphasis within academia (Boulter et al., 2023; Cartee, 2023), these can impact positively (strong leadership ethos, collegiality) or negatively (bullying, harassment, discrimination) within our careers and progression. Even as they are consistent with feminist values, caring and self-care expressed through "collegial kindness" are not enough for underrepresented/priority groups engaged in ongoing unequal playing fields within an academic system (Burton, 2021).

Our approach to feminist comentoring seeks to nurture alliances both inside and outside academia, and to unite across intersectionalities, to produce meaningful research that

contribute to collective feminist action (Christou & Janta, 2019). Our future focus is to forge not only approaches to welcoming, accommodating, and evaluating peripheral voices, but also to embrace multimodal practices that most appropriately resonate with the diversity of applied sensory experiences within communities. These include, for instance, our collaboration with New Zealand artist Shannon Novak on the Make Visible project, which engages artmaking as a catalyst for foregrounding and advocating key health and well-being priorities within sexually and gender diverse communities (Novak et al., 2022). The co-mentoring feminist approach has demonstrated success via traditional academic outlets (e.g., publications, grant funding), and also in nontraditional community spheres operating within a social justice framework (Gardiner et al., 2007). Thus, we not only elevate other members of our co-mentoring team but emphasise minority community voices through our research and practice, ultimately producing outcomes with meaningful impact.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Amy B. Mullens (she/her) is a practicing clinical and health psychologist and a Professor at the University of Southern Queensland. Amy leads the health equity research theme within the UniSQ Centre for Health Research and engages in community-based research

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Carol du Plessis (she/her) is a clinical psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Counselling at the University of Southern Queensland and a member of the university's Centre for Health Research. Carol's research focuses on telling the stories of marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities through the use of narrative methods. She is an internationally recognised expert in psychobiography and has published a number of psychobiographical studies.

Beata Batorowicz (she/her) is an Associate Professor in Visual Arts and Associate Head of School (Research) at the University of Southern Queensland. She is a contemporary artist exhibiting nationally and internationally. Beata's creative projects, such as *Stitched With Care* (2025), and publications, such as "Empathetic Unsettlement: Trauma as Spectre in Contemporary Textile Art" (with Jane Palmer), focus on the role of visual storytelling as a person-centred and creative catalyst for collaboration, mentoring, well-being, and cultural resiliency. Beata is also the Vice President of the Australia Council for Deans and Directors of Creative Arts Executive Board.

Tait Sanders (Tait/they/she/he, in no particular order) is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland. They live and work on the land of the Gulibal people of the Bundjalung nation. Tait's research critically engages with conceptualisations of gender detransition and embodiment and is currently centred within an anarchitectural genealogy. Recently, Tait presented their work "Bush Bashing, an Excavation of Detransition" at the Second International Trans Studies Conference. Additionally, they have authored several publications focused on trans* incarceration (the addition of an asterisk signifies inclusivity of non-cisgender identities).

Annette Brömdal (Netta/they/them) is based at the University of Southern Queensland, where they lead the Sexuality and Gender Research Program Team. Their internationally recognised research focuses on health promotion, bodies, gender, and sexuality in partnership with LGBTQIA+ Sistergirl and Brotherboy communities. With over 70 publications, Annette's work informs policy and practice across corrections, health, education, and human rights. They have contributed insights to global guidelines, including the United Nations report on *Mapping of Good Practices for the Management of Transgender Prisoners* and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's (WPATH) Standards of Care (SOC-8). Annette also serves on editorial boards for *Scientific Reports* and the *International Journal of Transgender Health*.