

Please cite the Published Version

Colley, Helen (2004) Learning experiences of adults mentoring socially excluded young people: issues of power and gender. In: Adult Education Research Conference and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, 27-30 May 2004, University of Victoria, British Columbia. (Unpublished)

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: Paper presented to the joint conference of the Adult Education Research Conference and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, University of Victoria, British Columbia, 27-30 May 2004

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Learning Experiences of Adults Mentoring Socially Excluded Young People: Issues of Power and Gender

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Paper presented to the joint conference of the *Adult Education Research Conference and the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education*, University of Victoria, British Columbia, 27-30 May.

Abstract: *Adult educators have not as yet investigated the vast movement of adults who mentor socially excluded youth. But these mentors are adult learners too. Their experiences suggest that mentoring – in any context – may entail the ‘toxic’ learning of emotional labour. More attention should be paid to their training from a perspective of social justice.*

Millions of adults across North America, Britain and other countries have volunteered for programs such as *Big Brothers Big Sisters*, which I have termed ‘engagement mentoring’ (defined below). These programs provide mentoring for socially excluded young people and claim to promote social justice. It is commonly assumed that mentors – around 80% of whom are women – also benefit from becoming involved, but a number of questions remain unexplored about their experience as learners. How do volunteers learn the mentor’s role, and what do they learn? Given high drop-out rates among such mentors, are there costs as well as benefits to their experience? How do issues of social justice apply to them?

Adult educators have not, thus far, turned their attention to mentoring in this context. They have focused on three arenas for adult-to-adult mentoring: business organisations, the academy, and initial education of professionals such as teachers and nurses. This is because we tend to assume that the learner in the dyad is the mentee, while the mentor is primarily a facilitator of learning. Consequently, mentoring for young people appears to be outwith the concerns of adult education, and research has addressed the learning of mentors only tangentially. However, adult educators (e.g. Hansman, 2002; Merriam, 1983; Stalker, 1994) have been at the forefront of developing critical perspectives on the power relationships of mentoring. Here I argue that these critiques can be extended – across all contexts of mentoring – by investigating the learning experiences of adults involved in engagement mentoring.

Most accounts of power relationships in mentoring consider only micro-level interactions within the mentoring dyad. The mentee is seen as subordinate and relatively passive, and the mentor as the powerful agent in the process. In rare discussions of the ‘dark side’ of mentoring, negative outcomes are therefore blamed on the mentor’s abuse of their superior power. Some advocate more reciprocal models, and question the intrusion of institutional interests in planned mentor relationships. However, these still portray the mentor as the partner who determines the quality of the interaction, choosing to convey or resist external pressures. Liberal feminist critiques (e.g. Standing, 1999) have therefore argued for models of mentoring based on reciprocity and nurture rather than hierarchy and control. However, these ignore the fact that women’s allocation to nurture, through socially-constructed gender roles, can act as a means of

exerting hierarchy and control over them (Colley, 2001a, 2003). We need to locate the dyad and *both* its members in wider patriarchal capitalist power relations and social structures.

Using such an analysis, Stalker (1994) offered a strategy for women mentors in academe to contest existing power relations by conscientizing their mentees, and encouraging collective action to resist rather than comply with male-dominated cultures. But the marginal ‘interstices’ for resistance of which she wrote are subject to contestation and struggle. Issitt (2000) suggests that the intensified productivity of caring work has limited women professionals’ space for collective reflection and resistance. In corporate contexts, similar developments have restricted the time available to develop meaningful mentor relationships (Alred & Garvey, 2000). This paper draws on doctoral research (completed in 2001 and reported fully in Colley, 2003) in order to explore such wider power relations through the lenses of class and gender, in the context of engagement mentoring. I analyse the dialectical relationship between dominant discourse and material practice, and its impact on mentors’ learning. This approach is especially relevant since, as in other forms of caring work, learning begins well before recruitment and training, as potential mentors encounter the dominant images and discourses that ‘market’ the role (cf. Hochschild, 1983).

Methodology

From a conventional start to my literature review, I swiftly noticed that explanations of the mentor role routinely referred to mythical images from Homer’s Ancient Greek epic, *The Odyssey*. I therefore adopted as part of my search a strategy of critical sampling across all contexts for mentoring, focusing both on texts which elaborated this myth within official discourse, and those which re-storied it from feminist and other critical perspectives (see Colley, 2001a).

The empirical research was a case study of a local mentoring scheme for ‘disaffected’ 16- and 17-year-olds referred by welfare agencies to a pre-vocational training program, anonymised as ‘New Beginnings’. Mentors were undergraduate volunteers, including mature students, from a neighbouring university, most of whom were studying social science or teaching degrees. (All personal names are also anonymised here to protect confidentiality.) Data were primarily generated through repeated individual, semi-structured interviews over a period of up to two years with an opportunity sample of matched mentors and mentees, established in nine relationships. I also undertook participant observation in the mentor training and the scheme steering group, and analysed scheme documentation. The data were synthesised using both linear and radial narrative techniques (see Colley, 2001b), drawing on theories of Foucault, Bourdieu and Marxist feminism.

I begin by considering how mentors learn their role from dominant discourses, and then report empirical findings about the learning experiences of mentors, concluding with a discussion of the implications for theorising power and gender in mentoring.

Dominant discourse: learning myths of Mentor

Early works on mentoring focused on the experiences of middle- and upper-class men (e.g. Levinson et al, 1978). Models of practice were paternalistic, and the mentor was typically referred to as a quasi-father figure. Authors often pointed to the origins of the word in the character Mentor in the *Odyssey*, whom Odysseus appointed as guardian to his infant son. In more recent texts, this imagery has shifted. One of the most powerful emblems of the mentoring movement today is the figure of Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom. In *The Odyssey*, she disguises herself as Mentor in order to transform Odysseus’ son from a weak boy to an adult warrior-prince, ready for his father’s return.

This myth is deployed to suggest that mentoring dates back thousands of years as an innately human practice, and to define the mentor's role in highly emotive and emotional terms. One evaluation of an influential youth mentoring project in the UK exemplifies the way in which it invariably promotes the mentor's role as one of 'selfless giving', 'with a readiness to go that "additional mile" beyond the call of duty' (Ford, 1999, p.14). This image is promoted in mentor recruitment leaflets, media reports of youth mentoring programs, and many other contexts of mentoring. Even liberal feminist critiques of paternalistic models appeal to mentors to emulate Athene as a symbol of nurture and female empowerment.

We should, however, beware the use of ancient myths to legitimate practices in our own socio-historical context. Myths train us to celebrate the *status quo*, not to act on the basis of critical consciousness (Barthes, 1972). What do these saintly images teach us about the ideal(ised) mentor? They emphasise the demand on mentors for self-sacrifice and self-denial: central aspects of bourgeois concepts of feminine care, particularly maternal care. Mentoring is thus defined as inherently unpaid labour, whether as a volunteer, or as additional to one's paid remit. The foundation of the relationship is presented as the loving devotion of the mentor to the mentee's needs. They imply that mentors require little training and support, since it is such a 'natural' activity. Finally, the myth suggests that the mentor has superhuman insight and miraculous powers to transform the mentee. Mentors therefore learn from dominant discourse how they are supposed transform themselves – what they learn to *be*. The expectation that they will transform their mentee leads us also to consider what they learn to *do*. What is the purpose of engagement mentoring?

Dominant discourse: learning to transform mentees

Engagement mentoring has a number of characteristics which locate it within welfare-to-work policies in an era of global economic competition. It is based on a view of social exclusion as a combination of deficit and deviance on the part of poor, working-class communities, and defines social inclusion narrowly as paid employment in the formal labour market. It is planned in institutional settings, with externally prescribed goals. It targets socially excluded young people, and includes elements of legal and financial compulsion to re-engage with the labour market. Moreover, it also targets their 'hearts and minds' through its primary goal of developing their 'employability': seeking to engage their personal commitment to meet employers' demand for workers dedicated to the company's interests. The role of the mentor is to transform them in this way.

Despite claiming a non-directive approach, most programs in the US in fact pursue these aims (Zippay, 1995). In Europe, as in North America, mentoring policies have firmly focused on transforming the attitudes, values, behaviour and beliefs of disadvantaged young people. Such policies teach mentors that personal characteristics, rather than deep-rooted social and economic inequalities, are the barriers to social inclusion, and mass media promote these ideas far more broadly. One key document from the European Commission (EC), purporting to promote a 'comprehensive pathway' for socially excluded young people that is 'holistic', 'empowering' and 'person-centred', provides a typical example of the role portrayed for mentors:

Each stage of the pathway is associated with bringing about a *significant shift in the values and motivation* of the young people, their skills and abilities and in their interaction with the wider environment. The overall objective is to move the young person from a position of alienation and distance from social and economic reality, to a position of social integration and productive activity. (EC, 1998, p.6, emphasis added)

It is not possible in this paper to analyse in detail the implications of such policies for young people themselves. Suffice it to highlight the normative assumptions they contain, teaching us that mentors should encourage a view of the labour market which erases any conflict of interests, and transform their mentees into employable – i.e. compliant – young workers. But how are these policies translated into practice?

The Labour government elected in Britain in 1997 began to allocate funding according to similar policies. Programs are therefore designed in order to meet specified funding requirements, which in turn means adopting prescribed goals and outcomes. The need to achieve these then informs mentor training and guidelines. At New Beginnings, managers saw the prime purpose of mentoring young people as ‘getting them into employment’. The mentors’ training sessions focused on that economically instrumental purpose, reinforced in their handbook, as the following extracts show:

Within your role as Mentor, by offering encouragement and support to your assigned young person, you could make a difference to [local] employment figures... You must maintain a positive outlook and remember that your aim is to encourage and promote the worth of training... Many young people do not wish to conform to the values and expectations that society upholds with reference to employment and training... Your role as Mentor is to encourage the minimisation of disaffection.

At first sight, these exhortations describe what the mentee is supposed to learn, but they seek to shape the learning of mentors too. The ideal mentor should embody the ideal employee, and encourage compliance with workplace discipline. This is further defined by the very limited opportunities open to socially excluded youth. At New Beginnings, young women were not allowed to train as nursery nurses, but placed in elderly care or hairdressing instead. A young man who wanted to become a computer operator was given nothing but paper-filing tasks. Mentors who tried to advocate on their mentee’s behalf were either berated as ‘unrealistic’, or ignored. However, the translation of dominant discourse into practice is contradictory and contested. Let us see what mentors at New Beginnings learned from their experience.

Learning experiences of engagement mentors

One of the first things that mentors learned was that, without exception, the young people resisted employment and training outcomes as the focus of their mentoring relationship. While they engaged to varying degrees with their pre-vocational training, even those who were enthusiastic about it had other agendas they wanted to pursue with their mentor. Some sought support for mental health problems or a difficult pregnancy. Others saw mentoring as a space to relax, escape the pressures of their lives, have fun, and get some unconditional attention from an adult. Younger mentors (19 or 20 years old) found this frustrating, and developed a strong sense of failure. In trying to pursue the employment-related goals of the scheme, their relationships broke down, and most came to resent their mentee’s failure to become rapidly ‘employable’.

The adult mentors in the sample (mature students in their 30s or 40s) responded to the young person’s agenda rather than that of the scheme. Some rejected the official framework for mentoring from the start, because of their own life experience and political beliefs:

Vic: I don’t think we should set ourselves up to say what people should be doing. I think certainly advise and perhaps, you know, point to alternative lifestyles. But people at the end of the day, even young people, should be in a position to choose, and if they choose something different, then why should we condemn them?

Others began by following the scheme guidelines, but soon perceived a clash between these and their mentee's concerns, deciding to prioritise the latter. Jane realised that her mentee, Annette, was using their sessions to discuss her bereavement of her mother and seek reassurance about her pregnancy. She checked the guidelines in the mentors' handbook, and as a result asked to see Annette's training plan the following week. Annette seemed shocked and annoyed by this request, and brought her maternity clinic planner every week instead – a graphic symbol of resistance which convinced Jane to change direction. She never asked for the training plan again, and later said: 'I think that was the moment when Annette really began to trust me'.

Such relationships were more successful from the young people's point of view, but led eventually to a sense of anxiety and failure among the mentors. They still felt under pressure to deliver outcomes demanded by the scheme, and this was expressed through forms of surveillance and self-surveillance. Keith had been a lifelong trade union and Labour Party activist before becoming a Sociology student. He had a strong sense of social justice, and passionately criticised the Labour government's policies on social exclusion, arguing that they encouraged the poor merely 'to suffer and be still'. His mentee, Neil, had learning disabilities, which Keith explicitly interpreted as difference rather than deficit. Yet when Neil was accused – without evidence – of stealing from his workplace, Keith undertook a role encouraged by the scheme staff: trying to get him to confess. He never discussed the issue of trade union representation to protect himself in the workplace, nor any of his other political experiences:

Keith: No, I've never really been able to talk to him on that level. I feel anybody who I'd be able to communicate with on that level might not necessarily be on the programme. I can't imagine that anyone who you're able to have an articulate political conversation with would be here.

Perhaps this reveals a residual prejudice against socially excluded youth. But the narrative of a young lesbian student, Rachel, who was involved in gay liberation and anti-war protests, suggests that mentors also internalised a tacit proscription on such topics. She concealed her weekend activities when asked by her mentee, worrying that she should not discuss matters unrelated to training and employability. The scheme required mentors to log topics discussed in mentoring sessions, and scheme staff would ask young people about this too, so they had a strong sense of being monitored. Rachel believed that staff would have intervened to prevent her talking about her anti-war activities. Had she discussed her involvement in gay liberation, she believed: 'We would have been chucked out of the building probably!'

Across the sample, women mentors referred to a further important – and painful – aspect of their learning: the need to work upon their own feelings as they attempted to transform their mentees. Their accounts resound with metaphors of violence:

Yvonne: What is a mentor? Sometimes I think I'm just a verbal punchbag, and that's what I'm there for. My mentee can come in and say, 'The whole world's shite and I don't want to do it', and just get it off her chest...

Jane: My mentee arrived [at court] twenty minutes late, and I thought, 'I can't do this any more, you know, if you keep making a fool of me', cos I'm making excuses for her all the time. But I constantly-, I kept thinking, you know, 'Bite your tongue', and maybe – just by building a relationship in that way...

The intense distress caused by such experiences was evident in most of their later interviews.

This study suggests two central aspects of mentors' learning. On the one hand, they learn tacitly (even prior to recruitment) that their own dispositions are supposed to express devotion

and self-sacrifice, through mythical images of feminine nurture. On the other, they learn more explicitly that their role is to reform their mentee's disposition in line with employers' demands for the ideal 'employable' worker. Mentors are supposed to embody both these ideals. In this way, resistance to paternalistic forms of mentoring has been countered by the shift to a maternalistic discourse, which idealises a bourgeois feminine culture of care and control. 'Women's ways' of being, knowing and doing have become corralled within a maternal myth that obscures its own oppressive effects. I conclude by discussing how this evidence allows us to extend the theorisation of power and gender in mentoring.

Discussion: theorising power and gender in mentoring

To understand the power dynamics of mentoring, we need to make explicit the theories of power that underpin different concepts of mentoring. Early paternalistic models of mentoring assume that power is a fixed-sum commodity, handed over from senior to junior – as one gains, the other loses. Reciprocal models assume that power(fulness) is a characteristic of individuals, mutually enhanced through the mentor's benign use of her superior power. Neither of these theories explains adequately the evidence presented above. The first ignores and the second underestimates the agency of mentees, and neither can account for the way in which the interests of dominant groupings impact through policy upon program design and, ultimately, individual practice and experience. In failing to account for gendered constructs of the mentor's role, they obfuscate the patriarchal oppression inherent in maternalistic models of mentoring.

Post-structural theories see power as decentred and disciplinary, not simply imposed upon but articulated through individuals (Foucault, 1980). It is wielded through “normalization ... concerned with the bringing about of a certain kind of individual with certain kinds of characteristics” (Quicke, 2000, p.307). This operates to produce docility by shaping dispositions to accept the social, political and economic *status quo* (Foucault, 1991). In this study, we can see how discourses of mentoring propose to alter the dispositions of both mentor and mentee in ways that are gendered and classed. The angelic devotion demanded of the one, and the devotion to the employer demanded of the other, can be understood as forms of docility which exert control over both. Power also provokes resistance, however. We have seen how young mentees and adult mentors were not solely constrained by engagement mentoring, but also partly enabled to exercise agency insofar as they felt able to escape or challenge surveillance.

Such theories help to describe the learning experiences of mentors, but are less successful in explaining why they are so. They fail to account adequately for social structures, and are weak in offering strategies for emancipatory change, treating all power as dangerous. In seeking to theorise the dialectical interplay of structure and agency, and differential power relations through which dyadic interactions are influenced by macro- and meso-level contexts, I have found Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' useful (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In particular, they help to analyse how global capitalism's fight for economic survival is expressed through the demand for employability and devotion to employers' interests in the field of engagement mentoring. This in turn construes habitus – of both mentor and mentee – as a raw material, and mentoring as a labour process to reform habitus as a saleable commodity. Marxist feminist theories (e.g. Hochschild, 1983) analyse capitalist and patriarchal power in relation to the means of production. From this perspective, mentoring can be viewed as a form of emotional labour. The mentor learns that she must produce a particular state of mind in herself in order to produce a particular state of mind in the young mentee. When our very emotions are controlled and prescribed in the service of the labour market in this way, the mentor is likely to sustain personal costs, including intense alienation. Because of their gendered habitus, internalising oppressive structures and domains of feeling (Heller, 1979), women are

disproportionately vulnerable to the social injustices entailed. This critical theorising of power and gender offers a more complex understanding of the contradictions evident in mentors' learning in this study. It may also have similar implications for mentoring in other contexts.

These issues are important for adult educators, who should turn their attention to the training of mentors for disadvantaged youth. We need to offer antidotes to the 'toxic' learning involved in their preparation for emotional labour, not least by exposing the 'régime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) purveyed by its myths. Stalker's (1994) call for conscientization of mentees needs extending to mentors too, in order to re-instate a genuine concern for social justice in practice. Otherwise mentoring will continue to cloak itself in the rhetoric of compassion, while promoting the brutal commodification of the very humanity to which it appeals.

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