A critical safe, supportive space: a collaborative autoethnography of a woman’s academic mentoring circle

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Abstract

Purpose – The study examines the benefits and potential challenges of the mentoring circle as an innovative approach to mentoring among four cisgendered women faculty situated at 4-year universities in various geographic locations in the United States.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilizing collaborative autoethnography, we ask: How can mentoring circles be beneficial for diverse early- and mid-career faculty women in higher education? Given our varying positionalities and the development of our sustained mentoring relationships, we drew on the concepts of intersectionality and sisterhood as a framework to understand our individual and collective experiences in the circle. Through a collaborative autoethnographic design, we examined data from four 3-h online video reflective discussions as well as relevant documents and communication, such as emails and texts.

Findings – The power dynamics within the circle, fluidity of its borders and how it provided us with a unique ability to read the world contributed to a sense of community and empowerment that were key factors to the circle’s success. We created an inclusive space with a defined purpose where trust, authenticity, reciprocity and the expectation for vulnerability served as the solid foundation for relationships. We became sources of holistic support, sharing advice and resources to support our growth as teachers, scholars and community members within our field and beyond.

Originality/value – Our mentoring circle disrupts conventional mentoring structures and highlights the power of a sustainable circle among diverse women faculty rooted in adaptive, flexible and responsive relationships.

Keywords Mentoring, Mentoring circle, Faculty mentoring, Sisterhood, Collaborative autoethnography

Paper type Research paper

The power of mentorship to support, guide and socialize early-career faculty in higher education, particularly those from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds, is well established (Alvarez and Lazzari, 2016; Gander, 2013; Hammer et al., 2014; Jones and Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). As such, universities and professional organizations in all fields have developed formal mentoring programs. Within the field of educational leadership, professional associations like the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Division A host
formal pre-conference mentorship workshops for early-career scholars. Yet these formalized mentoring programs often face challenges finding sufficient and competent mentors, ensuring successful mentoring matches and combating “unchallenged assumptions about knowledge and power” at the core of some faculty mentor–mentee relationships (Darwin and Palmer, 2009, p. 126).

Mentoring scholars advocate for a multi-pronged approach, where early-career faculty can develop a network of formal and informal mentoring relationships that promote sustained personal and professional support, learning and growth (Darwin and Palmer, 2009; Dominguez and Hager, 2013). This paper examines the benefits and challenges of one collaborative and innovative, yet underexamined and underutilized, approach to mentoring in higher education among faculty: the mentoring circle (Statti and Torres, 2018). Darwin and Palmer (2009) explain how “mentoring circles move away from the traditional dyadic model and, instead, use an innovative, group mentoring model . . . [that] typically involves one mentor working with a group of mentees or groups of people mentoring each other” (pp. 126–127). Mentoring circles provide for the sharing of “experiences, challenges and opportunities to create solutions” (pp. 126–127) among members, with all individuals supporting one another. Other advantages include “Individuals gain[ing] access to networks, [experiencing a] reduction in feelings of isolation, greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progression, knowledge acquisition, a better understanding of the culture and academic demystification” (Darwin, 2000, as cited in Darwin and Palmer, 2009, p. 127). Additionally, mentoring circles draw on other positive aspects of mentoring models, including peer and mutual mentorship (Beane-Katner, 2014). The guidelines for implementing a successful mentoring circle model also include “commitment to attend; confidentiality; the rapport between circle members; and voluntary attendance” (Darwin and Palmer, 2009, p. 134). Scholars who implemented mentoring circles found that “creating a safe and supportive space for faculty” (Waddell et al., 2016, p. 71) was critical to the success of this approach.

Utilizing a collaborative, autoethnographic method (Chang et al., 2012) rooted in the theoretical concepts of intersectionality (Cho et al., 2013) and sisterhood (Murakami and Núñez, 2014), we – the four cisgendered women faculty in the circle – ask: How can mentoring circles best serve diverse early- and mid-career faculty women in higher education? We purposefully deviate from the “norm” in answering this question, as the mentoring circle does, reflecting the collective and individual experiences and voices of the circle members through both first person (I/we) and third person (she/her). Our circle is composed of three tenure-track professors and one professor with tenure, all situated at 4-year universities in the United States. This latter aspect is unique when considering that existing research on mentoring circles is often examined among faculty within one university setting (Darwin and Palmer, 2009; Waddell et al., 2016); thus, this study responds to this gap in the literature. The four universities include two Hispanic-serving institutions, one an R2 (high research activity) and the other an R3 (moderate research activity) institution and two universities being R1 (very high research activity) institutions. Enrollments vary from 30,000 to 40,000.

As circle members, we come from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds (White and Latinx), are of varying ages and bring a diverse skill set reflecting previous professional roles (Kent et al., 2013; Poulsen, 2012). Similarly, we work within the field of educational leadership. We met in the spring of 2018 through the AERA Division A Early-Career Scholar Mentoring Seminar, where the three pre-tenured faculty were formally paired with the tenured faculty member. What began as a formal mentoring relationship organically morphed into a mentoring circle. Given the geographic distance between us, we quickly harnessed technology to create an adapted form of mentoring that continues today. The members of the circle set aside 1–2 h per month to meet.
Individual contexts that shape our circle

While the benefits of mentoring for professional growth are important, we recognize that they transcend the workspace (Dominguez and Hager, 2013). The desire for mentoring is intricately connected to the contexts in which we are located, physically and socially. We each came to the circle with our own goals and expectations shaped by past experiences with mentoring, reflective of our varying and unique understandings of mentorship and what that has meant to us as students, faculty and now within our circle. As such, we offer a glimpse of some of the mentoring we have received and the institutional complexities we each wrestle with as we work to bridge the personal and professional experiences that have been validated through and shaped our mentoring circle.

Amy’s mentoring experiences

Knowing first-hand the power of mentoring, I enrolled in the AERA mentoring session at the onset of my new career. The session offered a mysterious connection, a sense of relief and a much-needed sense of hope. The result is better than I could have imagined. I yearned for more time than the session allotted, so I was relieved that our mentor offered a commitment to continue to meet with us. Every ounce of me desired this connection to stick. These were my thoughts as I navigated the airport for my return flight. It was that flight that ended up being the most terrifying experience of my life. While the aircraft struggled to stay in the air, I found myself to be one window away from a tragedy. Now, I was navigating not only a new career, but I was learning to handle post-traumatic stress and survivor’s guilt. The importance of the mentoring circle immediately escalated.

Shannon’s mentoring experiences

The idea of mentoring has been a very foreign concept to me. I have certainly had significant people in my life who have offered guidance, wisdom and insight both in a formal and informal sense. Likewise, I’ve also had people who inspired me and made me question fundamental assumptions about myself, my field and the role that I should play in my profession. Yet, reflecting upon the role that mentorship has played in my life feels oddly out of sorts with how I’ve always understood the process to be. For one, the idea of mentoring has always seemed to be a formal paternalistic/maternalistic form of guidance. In that sense, I’ve certainly enjoyed something equivalent to that when I studied under my doctoral supervisor in graduate school. Mentorship also suggests something more pragmatic – that is, the passing on of critical experience and wisdom, an acceleration in my own familiarity with an otherwise unfamiliar professional world through the experiences of another (Mullen, 2016). By that definition, I have certainly had “mentors.” Prior to becoming an academic, I was a higher education administrator. I worked for a university-supported non-profit and later worked for a for-profit extension program. I certainly had mentors (most of them women) guiding me, providing insights I needed to successfully navigate these worlds. Not one of these women presented themselves as mentors. They primarily saw themselves as my supervisor and therefore were perhaps obligated to invest in my success. Yet, the supervision blended into something much more. There was care, investment and pride in my successes. They were my teachers.

As a junior faculty member, I desperately wanted a space where I could seek out guidance. The challenges of pre-tenure life reflect a complex interplay between institutional expectations, available support and faculty-level predispositions. This mentoring circle has been invaluable to me. It’s offered me opportunities to move from a position of “outsider” to one of “insider.” It’s allowed me to imagine myself as belonging.

Maritza’s mentoring experiences

Community has been a core aspect of my identity. I learned early on that my actions had consequences and these were reflected in the well-being of my community. This has
profoundly influenced my scholarship and work. Up to this point, I had only experienced mentoring as an individual endeavor. As a new faculty, I had an urgent need for mentoring but there was nothing in place aside from monthly university-sponsored meetings on pre-tenure topics. While helpful, these meetings did not fill the desire for community or mentorship that I yearned for, especially that first year. I sought support but was advised that assigning a mentor would be an imposition of structure unfavorable to relationship-building. That first semester was rather lonely.

I embraced the AERA Division A mentoring opportunity. I fully expected a one-on-one experience that would last for the duration of the face-to-face session that would transition into a collegial relationship. It exceeded my expectations. In that first session, we got to know each other, sharing openly and establishing a significant level of trust. Our mentor was open and willing to share practical tips and resources. I appreciated the advice, the resources and the realness – she did not sugarcoat anything. This is mentorship – willingness to share, trust and contribute. It was a game-changer. The mentoring circle became the embodiment of the collective, co-constructed with this first interaction and sustained through the mentoring circle.

**Melissa’s mentoring experiences**

I have had varying positive mentoring experiences since graduate school; I had two Latina faculty mentors while pursuing my master’s degree who were instrumental in my decision to pursue my doctorate, a Latino male dissertation advisor who helped socialize me to the world of academia via research and publishing and several informal faculty mentors of color who supported me on my doctoral journey. As a faculty member, I have had formal and informal mentoring, from folks of diverse backgrounds. I mention the gender and racial/ethnic identities of mentors because, as research has found (Freeman and Kochan, 2019), such aspects can serve as vital points of connection for underrepresented faculty, as they have done for me.

I was part of another mentoring circle early in my career that similarly was composed of women who worked outside my institution, women whom I had befriended while pursuing my doctoral program and worked with on a collaborative research project. Though I remain close friends with the women in that first mentoring circle, our scheduled group convenings ended when the writing related to our project ceased.

As a mentor, I am intentional with doctoral students and early-career faculty, offering insights and fostering a sense of community to help them navigate the complexities of academia, especially if they are from underrepresented and/or marginalized communities. Thus, when I was invited to participate as a mentor in the AERA Division A early-career scholars program, I gladly agreed. I realize now that the timing of beginning this mentoring circle was kismet as I needed continued mentorship and support of my own as a mid-career faculty member.

**Theoretical framework**

We applied an integrated theoretical framework for this study that drew on the concepts of intersectionality and sisterhood. Intersectionality effectively captured the dynamics of our mentoring circle with respect to gendered and racialized power endemic to the academy. Intersectionality was first introduced by Black feminist legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who utilized the term to describe the overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalization experienced by Black women in anti-discrimination law and feminist and anti-racist work. Intersectionality recognizes “the dynamics of difference and sameness [as it] has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race and other axes of power” (Cho *et al.*, 2013, p. 787). Intersectionality also enables us to adopt an “analytic disposition” (p. 795) to make meaning of our mentoring circle, to view
intersectionality as a means by which to consider power across our sameness and difference. Likewise, we can view our multiple identities as overlapping, permeating and fluid. This fluidity is both a production of and response to power – power residing in all aspects (and expectations) of being women faculty (Cho et al., p. 795). Since then, intersectionality has been adopted across disciplines, particularly by women, feminists and critical scholars seeking to dismantle multiple forms of oppression within societal institutions, including education spaces (Cho et al., 2013). Though there is scant research on mentoring circles like our own, several women faculty scholars have embraced intersectionality to describe the power of writing collectives (Alvarez et al., 2016) and mentoring relationships (Suriel et al., 2018).

We also follow in the footsteps of feminist scholars and women faculty who have discussed the concept, role and power of sisterhood (Suriel et al., 2018) in the lives of women working in academia and the mentoring relationships they forge with other women. Harley (2008) acknowledged how Black women faculty embody multiple roles and communities, including Black sisterhood, in ways that shape their experiences within the academy. Murakami and Núñez (2014) described sisterhood, or hermandad, as a product of intentional work among a group of Latina tenure-track faculty participating in a peer mentoring group, the Research for the Educational Advancement of Latin@/s (REAL) collaborative at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Ruiz and Machado-Casas (2013), also in the REAL collaborative, noted how hermandad was fostered through the peer mentorship group because it was “based on respect, support, shared concerns and common goals” (p. 61). Thus, mentorship offered through sisterhood can provide a space where the multiple and often marginalized identities and assets of participants are acknowledged, respected, embraced and shared in the context of professional roles and responsibilities (Murakami and Núñez, 2014; Núñez et al., 2015), providing for the exchange of resources and individual and collective growth.

Methods/design
When the COVID-19 pandemic arose, we realized our established mentoring circle was already conducive to social distancing and provided a critical, safe space. We established trust within our collective, which had been developed over the last 4 years. We met between 1 and 2 h at a time each month, beginning in May 2018 and continuing to the present. The agendas for our circle meetings are loosely coupled yet include personal check-ins as well as discussion of current professional needs (individually and collectively). Though Melissa first tended to lead the circle, leadership quickly became shared. Thus, over time, the depth in which we turned to each other and shared details of our personal lives, the challenges we faced with work, family and health, as well as joys, deepened. In our circle, we experienced opportunities to collaborate and support each other personally and professionally. Being fully aware that we shared lived experiences, we decided to study our experiences through a collaborative autoethnography and shed light on the intricacies of the mentoring relationship forged in our circle, recognizing the value in examining, reflecting upon and sharing our experiences with others as a diverse group of women faculty. To clarify, collaborative autoethnography is a method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical and ethnographic (Chang et al., 2012). Given this methodological approach, we discussed ethical considerations and mutually agreed that there was no need for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data collection and analysis
We adapted our collective autoethnographic approach, engaging in four 3-h oral discussions held and recorded via Zoom video. These served as both our primary sources of data and
analysis with an exclusive focus on our experiences in the mentoring circle. Our discussions were guided by the following agreed-upon questions:

(1) What can be learned from our narrative reflections/testimonios regarding the power of our mentoring circle?

(2) How did our mentoring circle support us and enable us to tell our truths as a diverse group of women?

(3) What challenges did we face in sustaining our circle, if at all?

Supporting data gathered and referred to when needed included all existing documents and communication between the members of the mentoring circle, such as emails, texts and collaborative projects, including written conference proposals and papers.

Data analysis occurred over a series of three sessions where we conducted iterative rounds of coding and thematic analysis. During our first session, we reviewed our guiding questions and entered reflective discussion while taking in vivo notes. We transcribed our conversation within a shared Google document. In our second session, we coded individually, reading through the notes and transcripts from the reflective discussion. This led to the individual identification of thematic codes supported by significant quotes that would depict an accurate collaborative ethnographic account of our mentoring circle. We each shared and made note of our individual thematic codes, generating a collective list of 12 codes. The codes were discussed, collapsed and combined to create three overarching themes with subthemes. During our third session, we reviewed all collected data (transcripts, video, emails) and created a spreadsheet to assist us in the process of identifying and organizing all relevant quotes/narratives for each relevant theme and subtheme. Collectively, we wrote our findings and discussion section. In this final session, we agreed to take an unconventional approach of telling our mentoring circle story. We recognized that though we had themes and subthemes, these were interconnected in ways that could not be depicted linearly on paper. As such, findings are presented in narrative form with integrated themes italicized for emphasis.

**Findings: the story of our mentoring circle**

We characterize our mentoring circle as a shared space that illustrates fluid and dynamic borders. This dynamism is largely represented through the construct of time. As faculty, we must view time as a form of currency. We are bound, for instance, by a work–life that is divided and subdivided into time increments. In the broadest sense, we’re beholden to the institutionally mandated time blocks that regulate promotion and tenure. Our performance is therefore conditioned upon time to publication, deadlines, classroom contact hours and service-related commitments. As a currency, the normative expectation is to protect time, invest time wisely and do so in alignment with our professional reward system. Time and the choices we make around time become a predicate for our professional success.

In the context of our circle, we have tended to view time in an unstructured and unregimented way, which works in stark contrast to the professional norms that regulate our lives as academics. The mentoring circle has served as a space where we acknowledge the innate need for community that may not be normative in higher education. As Amy shares,

Mentoring is an unsexy topic in higher ed . . . maybe it’s showing a sign of weakness or putting your poker hand on the table, saying, “Hey! I need a community to get through this!” Mentoring may expose parts of the academy that have not been exposed before.

Efforts in the academy have typically been perceived as highly individualized endeavors. It can be argued that expending the highly coveted resource of time on mentoring activities is not valued or privileged in the academy. Amy reminds us, “One of the challenges to
meaningful mentoring is that it is unrewarded in the academy.” The mentoring circle itself has served as counterspace where we have developed, experientially, this “ability to read the world.” Shannon expands further, highlighting the boundaries of what it means to work within the academy:

Higher Ed has historically been steeped in this language, this narrative around meritocracy and merit . . . mentoring pushes against that in a lot of ways . . . for obvious reasons. It provides an equalizing effect and academe has often not been so receptive to equalizing interventions.

Our circle’s border fluidity serves as a rejection of the boundedness of time and reflective of our belief in the natural ebb and flow to our shared participation. We actively resist time as a regulative force in our work together. We do this in part because, as women academics, we are professionals and caretakers. We maintain responsibilities to those whom we love and care for in our personal lives in addition to the taxing commitments of our pre-tenured/tenured lives. This flexibility reflects the care we assume for one another. At its essence, it is a recognition of our commitments to so many other things. The permeability and fluidity of our group is, therefore, a normative feature of our shared space.

Our shared acceptance over the choices we make around time frees us from concerns over the legitimacy of our group. Such concerns have been disproven by the force that compels us together – namely, the unquestioned understanding, compassion and love we have for one another. This circle is as much about our physical and mental well-being as is it about our professional well-being. In the end, it is the dynamism of time and the rejection of our need to stay “bounded” by conventional time arrangements that serves as a reinforcing agent that moves us forward in our continued work together.

The circle itself is an extension of the fluidity and dynamism we have co-constructed. The circle has served as a non-hierarchical and non-linear container where we are free to fully express ourselves and honor life’s natural rhythms. Despite our circle beginning in the context of a formalized mentor–mentee program, our relationship was grounded in equity, reciprocity and agency, which set the tone for this non-hierarchical, shared power dynamic.

Melissa first admitted, “I do not feel hierarchical. I learn from you all and feel the support and love.” Amy, who studies mentoring as a part of her research, shared, “Authentic mentoring is reciprocal in nature. Melissa always reminds us about that. I recognize our circle is authentic because it’s reciprocal in nature. It really has to do with Melissa setting the tone.” Melissa shared the challenges: “It never was didactical or hierarchical. It was different; all members, including the organizer, were hungry for it.”

The way we co-constructed our mentoring circle reflects virtues that “you cannot teach . . . transparency, authenticity, vulnerability.” It is these values that contribute to our ability to read the world of academia, to recognize that we have the power to reframe our expectations of ourselves within this field. This shared understanding is reflective of a connection we have based on core values, described by Amy as “magical.”

The freedom of expression within the circle has further strengthened the relationships between group members. Our primary goal in coming into the circle was community and interconnectedness. What we found was an unconditional acceptance where we were “allowed to come with our full selves, free of judgment.” This reiterates how the power dynamics of the circle are not transactional: “To all my relations, you are my other me, when you’re well, I’m well.” It’s a completely different way of entering into a relationship, uncommon for folks for whom it’s not their way of being” (Maritza).

We recognize the sacredness and healing power of the circle and how circles have roots in Indigenous communities where circles represent life. We draw parallels to how the circle has supported our engagement with one another, differentially from how we may have otherwise. To illustrate, we offer that a typical approach to mentoring is often transactional, where one asks questions such as “What can this mentoring group do for me?” or “How can this group

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help me produce X publications?” In contrast, we entered the circle from a place of gratitude with a mutual desire to arrive as we were fully. It’s a space where we have built community, where we can be vulnerable and where we know we will be held. It is a space of renewal where we can recharge and emerge stronger than when we entered because we have honored all of ourselves.

Community serves as a centering force in our work together, where community is expressed and reinforced through our caretaking function and our communication practices. Caretaking has been a central function of our circle. While we all personally hold roles as caretakers, we are constantly working to navigate and balance the professional pressures of tenure, promotion and productivity. Because we are in constant flux, operating in a state of professional uncertainty, it is easy to succumb to institutional pressures. Maintaining our personal roles and responsibilities with family can take a backseat if we are not careful. In this way, the circle has served as a space where we can privilege the role of caretaking, both caretaking of self and caretaking of each other.

The role of caretaking was a priority in the circle at its inception. During the first email exchanges, the prioritization of care and well-being was evident. In that first email, Melissa encouraged sharing beyond the formal AERA mentoring opportunity, deliberately opening the space for interconnection. In response, Martiza openly shared her struggles as a first-year professor and the weight of teaching on the tenure evaluation process, stating, “Student evaluation metrics matter a great deal at my institution. I’m hoping to get a handle on my teaching in addition to the publishing, but it can be overwhelming. I am struggling a bit through this first year and though I am trying to be patient with myself, I feel the pressure.

There was an openness in this initial exchange that provided the tone and tenor of the mentoring group. Importantly, it was the post-AERA email from Melissa that solidified caretaking within our circle. That AERA conference was marked by a tragedy. Amy was on a plane and experienced the tragedy as it unfolded, suffering the proximal and distal consequences of the event. Melissa opened the post-AERA email by leading with Amy’s experience and reconnecting the group to the preciousness of life. Melissa stated, “First of all, I know that Amy was on the commercial plane yesterday to Dallas that had to make an emergency landing. I want you to know that I’m glad you’re okay. Life is precious and it’s moments like these that remind us of just how fragile it is.

In the same email, Melissa shared additional documents as part of a follow-up to our in-person session and concluded with an open invitation to continue our collaboration and consider the adoption of shared scholarship.

On the surface, this exchange to some may seem small and trivial. To the circle members, it had a tremendous impact for multiple reasons. In that single exchange, Melissa prioritized personal care by placing it first and foremost. She included all of us in this intimate experience that some may have chosen to keep private. We had created a space where we could be authentic and vulnerable. Melissa shared documents and the possibility for scholarship that would support us with our tenure and promotion process in the second position. In many ways, this has shaped the tone of our evolving relationship in the mentoring circle.

Amy, who was at the center of the tragic event, shared, “I felt really cared for. Thinking about all the things that Melissa freely gave – her time, her documents, sharing her stories – including a breakthrough and an emotional experience . . . Those stories, her experiences, permitted me to take care of myself.” Similarly, Maritza discussed her trust in the group and freedom from feeling judged: “We are not disengaged . . . it goes back to this idea of taking care of [ourselves] and being taken care of.”
Throughout the duration of the circle, we have experienced many challenges in our personal lives. During these moments, we have shared with each other and felt comfort knowing that we have the right to care for ourselves and receive care. For us, the mentoring circle has become family. As Amy stated, “I always felt cared for. There was someone who cared for me. Someone is the mentoring circle. Others appear to care, but here we really care.” The concept of family as a descriptor of the community created within the circle was shared among members and further reified through the events that transpired during the pandemic.

In the fall of 2020, all circle members experienced the personal loss of family members. Two lost a parent and two had partners who lost a parent. With the losses, we turned to our circle for support and received it. Melissa described the role of the mentoring circle through the loss, “very much like family.” For Shannon, the mentoring circle has been an extension of the professional in addition to the personal. In this way, Shannon reflected on the support received from the group during her loss and shared the meaning that the support held for her in those moments: “the flowers you sent were the representation of my professional life.” The mentoring circle transcended beyond the boundaries of the professional and personal, highlighting the dynamism and fluidity. As Amy further described, “the mentoring circle embodied the reciprocity of care.” She stated, “When you have a true connection and unconditional love, there is the feeling of being cared for. I have felt cared for as I experienced a sense of loss and dealing with death and wanted to extend care.”

In the mentoring circle, we are free to express ourselves fully. As Shannon stated,

In education and in the roles that we play and in our gender expression, there is this notion of caretaking. We are relied upon in many respects to do so . . . this is the one form in which that expression is freely given and freely received.

It’s palpable in the ways in which our relationships have grown and evolved over time. Amy described this as a level of respect that we have for each other, given who we are, that has fostered our community. She stated,

There are unifying traits among this group that are sort of glue-like . . . I do not know if it’s values or based on respect – professional respect. Personal respect. As women. As marginalized women. Or is what we have just our unique ways of coming into sisterhood?

Communication is an essential feature of our community. Given the flexible and fluid borders we maintain within the context of the group, there is a general recognition that it is our communication and the quality of the communication that serves as a critical component that holds our community together. Circle members are in vastly different regions of the country. We have different time zones to negotiate, schedules, lifestyles, diverse caretaking responsibilities and diverse ways of being. The mechanism that assures continuity within this diversity is best articulated through the conditions for and expectations of our communication. Consequently, we have carried out circle communications in two fundamental ways. The first is through the multi-faceted ways in which we communicate. The second reflects the openness and unconditional nature of our communications. We speak to each in turn.

From the start, we embraced all forms of communication as a means for us to stay connected. Whether it be through text, phone, social media (Twitter and Facebook), Zoom, or even (when possible) in person, there are no assumptions over the method by which we come to communicate with one another. As Amy stated, “to me, the value is in knowing I can get you [the circle] in lots of different ways . . . it does not just have to be email. It’s not stuffy like that.” Given the physical distance between us, we have relied heavily upon Zoom as our preferred method for reaching one another. That said, we routinely engage in texting and support one another via social media posts as a means of connection. Often, the goal for our communication is to recognize, encourage and further cultivate the connection that we maintain as a circle.
This multi-faceted approach to our communication assures that we’re able to transcend the distances between us. For example, as was previously noted, all of us lost a parent or the parent of a significant other. Each individual loss represented a personal journey of both profound grief and reflection and mindfulness as we sought to care for our loved ones. For one of us, that journey was a literal one as she and her partner made their way across the country by car amid a pandemic so that they could attend to arrangements for her partner’s father. In these moments, communication took the form of social media posts, texts and Zoom. Maritza shared, I often would think to myself, oh, the group does not have time for me because it’s the middle of the night on the East Coast. But I also know that someone somewhere is available right now, even when the others may be asleep. And even if no one is available at that exact moment, I know that someone will respond.

Moments like these were deeply challenging and deeply personal, yet the support offered to one another was given freely.

While our circle has adopted a multi-faceted approach to our communication, the substance of that communication serves as the most critical condition for how our circle functions in support of each circle member. In our conversations and reflections, the most common term used to describe that connection is “lifeline.” The choice in terminology may not be accidental. Taken from old English, the term lifeline was originally a reference to a rope used to guide distressed shipping vessels into safe harbor. In a metaphorical sense, this circle is indeed a lifeline to our members. It is a space that supports us through the many different professional and personal challenges we’ve faced. From the stress of third-year reviews, personal loss, or disappointing encounters with colleagues or campus leadership, our circle has freely given support where it was needed most.

For three of the four members, the stress and turmoil that come with the pre-tenure process make the notion of the “circle as lifeline” a particularly apt metaphor. Shannon commented,

That’s one thing that became very clear that given the expectations of the profession, the pre-tenure stress . . . everything is contingent until we get the sign-off from the provost, it does become a deeply personal experience. So having that opportunity to have these open conversations is invaluable but also recognizes the personal and professional for me, gets blended a lot in ways that I never imagined that it would. I think this really speaks to what this circle means to me.

This notion of a lifeline is further echoed in the words of Melissa and Amy. Amy, for instance, spoke of the circle with reference to recent trauma: “This mentoring circle has fulfilled me and been a true lifeline.”

Per Figure 1, we’ve imagined our mentoring circle as conditioned upon a permeable yet dynamic structure. This dynamism allows us to pivot between our personal and professional worlds, even in those moments in which the personal and professional worlds must be effectively negotiated. The circle’s fluidity places emphasis upon the recognition that each member is a whole being – that our professional lives as tenured/pre-tenured academics is (for better or worse) counterbalanced by our need to honor our commitments to family, friends and partners. How we do this most effectively is by honoring shared expectations over the centrality of our caretaking and the methods and substance of our communications.

Discussion
This collaborative autoethnography tells the story of one mentoring circle composed of a diverse group of four cisgendered women academics. The focus of this study is a meditation on our process, the forces that compelled us together and the conditions upon which we now function. From this process, we have drawn some critical insights about what we have learned from our reflections about the power of the sisterhood formed through our mentoring
circle, how we demonstrated support for one another and the challenges we faced in carrying out the circle and in maintaining authenticity in all we do given our intersecting identities and the axes of oppression and power we each confront in our roles and contexts. We respond to our research questions in turn.

What did we learn?

Several key factors contributed to the success and power of our mentoring circle, including the intentionality of the tenured mentor to create the inclusive group and space with a defined purpose where trust, authenticity and the expectation for vulnerability served as the solid foundation from which to build our relationships. In this spirit, reciprocity and peer mentorship was practiced and appreciated, as well as the ability for each of us to serve as critical friends and colleagues who could assist us in negotiating the pains and struggles we experienced with colleagues at our own institutions, including instances related to misogyny and racism (Freeman and Kochan, 2019). We also became sources of instructional support, sharing advice and resources to support our growth as teachers, researchers and faculty in various administrative and leadership roles in our service commitments on our campuses, in professional associations and on editorial boards for journals.

While it would be easy to suggest that such mentoring circles occur by happenstance—that they are the outgrowth of good timing, personality mixes, or transactional need—our experience speaks otherwise. This mentoring circle evolved with intentionality, with a genuine sense of care and concern for individual members and a desire to connect with others considering the challenges we faced as tenured/pre-tenured women academics. Among our many spoken and unspoken agreements were the following:

1. The professional–personal are inextricably linked for many working women—and particularly women academics. Consequently, our mentoring circle required that we
honor the co-existence of the personal–professional in how we carried out our mentoring circle and in the shared expectations that supported its existence.

(2) Our shared values for and understanding of intersectionality as women, feminists and critical scholars with varying identity backgrounds served as a precondition for our sisterhood and our circle’s sustainability.

(3) Our capacity to support one another was forged upon an understanding that mutuality would serve as an expectation and driver of our work together.

How did we extend support to one another? While engaging in this collaborative autoethnography, we learned that we instinctively applied the five relational mentoring strategies that Hammer et al. (2014) suggest in working with women faculty: (1) attending to power in academic relationships (including within our circle), (2) focus on mutuality (which includes being attentive to emotional needs and personal perceptions), (3) fostering authenticity, (4) listening into voice and (5) building a sense of community and connection. Each of these strategies reflects how we support one another.

Our commitment to community operates at the heart of our mentoring circle work. One way in which we have supported one another is by confronting issues of power at the outset. This was particularly challenging because the early-career workshop in which we met dictated a top-down paternalistic approach to mentoring support. So, while this power dynamic was apropos of the workshop, Melissa was quick to encourage a recalibration of those dynamics within the context of our circle. This paved the way for more authentic caretaking and support among the group members and was instrumental in how we came to define community.

We also recognized the importance of caretaking as a critical feature of our community building. As our findings indicate, the support we offered one another was flexible yet unconditional. Our continual validation of one another was a critical feature of the support we provided to one another. Likewise, our capacity to be flexible in our expectations, particularly so around time, ensured that we could continue to support one another in authentic, meaningful ways.

What were the known challenges to our work? In reflecting on our mentoring circle experiences, we realized that our institutions vary tremendously in terms of the requirements and expectations for tenure. We know the limits of our mentorship circle and do what we can to support one another despite variability in tenure criteria, student populations and institutional cultures/climates. For this reason, we do not view our mentoring group as being all-encompassing or necessarily responsive to all our individual needs – nor should it. Consequently, we have encouraged opportunities for each of us to develop a separate, unique mentoring network. We also identified some challenges in sustaining our circle related to (1) finding mutually available times to meet, (2) avoiding Zoom burnout once we began working online to a greater degree with the pandemic, (3) being distracted by all the demands associated with being faculty and (4) the need for ongoing recalibrating.

How can our work inform practice? There are benefits of formalized mentoring programs for faculty in higher education. We argue that, perhaps, formalized mentoring programs can be accepted as a mere start or entry point into deep, authentic mentorship. With that, we found evidence that a mentoring circle is established from the continuous, ongoing commitment of its members, as well as space and
time to grow. For others who wish to facilitate and support a similar mentoring circle in a higher education setting or other organizational context that lends itself to this approach, we acknowledge the need of the group members to embrace a shared ownership mindset and possess the ability to be comfortable with co-constructing the shared space. Moreover, trust and unconditional love are the cement for the circle’s sustainability.

Formalized mentoring in higher education and other organizational contexts often includes goals, tasks and checklists. Yet, our mentoring circle disrupts the conventional structure and reveals that these kinds of spaces are driven by the people involved. For example, we found that our sustainability comes from adaptive, flexible and responsive sisterhood. Furthermore, while conventional mentoring strategies can be utilized, we found we were more focused on the processes we embodied, which resulted in an authentic mentorship—a relationship.

We share these essential elements upon examining the benefits and difficult challenges we confronted in our mentoring efforts. Importantly, we also share a cautionary consideration. While our results were altogether positive, scalability is always challenging, whether in university or other organizational settings because it can be considered antithetical to mentoring practice. Even still, there is no guarantee of success to any mentoring endeavor. Therefore, we encourage those seeking to facilitate a mentoring circle to be opportunistic yet strategic with replication efforts. By sharing our story, we’re hopeful others can make an informed decision about sponsoring or entering a mentoring circle.

Limitations
As with any qualitative research study such as ours, the validity of the research project and the extent to which researchers can draw meaningful and defensible conclusions from the data is subject to limitations. Therefore, with these cautions in mind, we share our findings knowing the inherent challenges to generalizing across settings, conditions, variables and contexts.

Conclusion
Many organizations strive to provide an organic mentoring structure as part of their environment (Zachary, 2011). Yet, the degree to which current mentoring approaches in higher education are successful for diverse early- and mid-career faculty women vary. In this study, our aim was to identify and specifically name how the mentoring circle supports our professional and personal growth. Our findings suggest that mentoring circles are dynamic spaces where members can serve as active co-constructors of the mentoring space to attain individual and collective growth. The elements of communication, caretaking and vulnerability are essential to the active co-construction of the circle. The act of co-construction, in many ways, is also representative of the multiple opportunities that exist to strengthen connections between the circle’s members. A constant in the circle has been the continuous metamorphosis of the mentoring space itself, shifting to meet the individual and collective needs of the group.

Our voice in this collaborative autoethnographic research provides unique insight and removes some of the mystery of mentoring. Moreover, we acknowledge that the design of this study is highly contextualized in its attempt to link theory and practice. We placed ourselves in a vulnerable position to offer qualitative data and findings to others seeking a blueprint for a mentoring circle. Future research might replicate this methodological approach to better understand the challenges and complexities of such a mentoring experience. Ultimately, our hope is for other women to similarly embrace the notions of intersectionality and sisterhood as a means for reaping the benefits of mentorship.
References


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