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Gray, Mel; Agllias, Kylie; Schubert, Leanne; Boddy, Jennifer; "Doctoral research from a feminist perspective: acknowledging, advancing and aligning women's experience". Published in Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice Vol. 14, Issue 6, p. 758-775 (2015)

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1473325014565148>

Gray, Mel; Agllias, Kylie; Schubert, Leanne; Boddy, Jennifer; "Doctoral research from a feminist perspective: acknowledging, advancing and aligning women's experience", Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice Vol. 14, Issue 6, p. 758-775 Copyright © 2015 The Author(s). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1321294>

PREPUBLICATION VERSION

Doctoral research from a feminist perspective: Acknowledging, advancing and aligning women's experience¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses three feminist research principles through three doctoral studies and their accompanying supervision and support group: (i) capturing women's experience; (ii) improving women's lives; and (iii) equalising power. These guiding principles assisted in understanding the connections between feminist theory and the respective studies on: older people experiencing family estrangement (Kylie); a mentoring program with women from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jennifer); and (iii) arts-based intervention research to raise awareness of domestic violence in a disadvantaged community (Leanne). It discusses the way in which these guiding principles informed the studies and the supervision process from the students' and supervisor's perspective.

Key words: Feminist research, doctoral research, supervision

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¹ *Qualitative Social Work*. Published online before print January 6, 2015. doi: 10.1177/1473325014565148.

As feminist social work researchers, 'researching our experience is part of our action for social change' (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p. 169).

Students and practitioners often struggle to understand the connections between feminist theory and social work practice, how it relates to social justice and human rights, and how to conceptualise these concerns within research and practice. They thus tend to shy away from theory in research and teaching (Gray and Webb, 2013a; Trevithick, 2008). Consequently, although *praxis* – connecting theory to practice – is one of the central contributions offered by feminist social work research, it often unfolds only partially and in the absence of critical theoretical engagement (Gray and Webb, 2013b; Orme, 2003). Anecdotal reports suggest that doctoral students interested in critical social work and emancipatory research are often taught to 'add in' critical elements to their work rather than deliberately ground their research in critical theories and approaches. This paper considers three guiding principles for conducting research from a feminist perspective and illustrates them in relation to their PhD studies: (i) *capturing women's experience*: a study with older people experiencing family estrangement from a feminist-strengths perspective; (ii) *improving women's lives*: a study of a mentoring program with women from disadvantaged backgrounds from a feminist-structural strengths perspective; and (iii) *equalising power*: an arts-based intervention research study to raise awareness of domestic violence in a disadvantaged community from a feminist-participatory perspective. The paper ends with a discussion of how I, as a supervisor and my co-writers as my PhD students, engaged in research informed by feminist perspectives, thought and reflection.

What makes research feminist?

What makes feminist research uniquely feminist is not that it is done by women or deals with women's issues but 'the motives, concerns and knowledge brought to the research process' (Brayton, nd, p. 1). It is research from a particular standpoint. Hence feminist research is about taking women's location in, and perspective on, the world as the basis from which to proceed. It values and prioritises the voices and experiences of women (Beckman, 2014) and aims to change and improve the ways in which women understand and go about their lives (Gringeri, Wahab and Anderson-Nathe, 2010). Feminist research is primarily for and about women. However, there are many different feminisms resulting in contradictions and tensions within feminist research, including the value of empiricism and the role and purpose of male

perspectives (Hussain and Asad, 2012; Orme, 2003). In this paper, we highlight three common threads on which feminists are likely to agree. First, feminist research is about understanding women's experiences. Secondly, its underlying objective is to improve women's lives. Thirdly, feminist researchers are concerned with equalising or reducing power imbalances in the researcher-respondent relationship. These themes can be used as guiding principles by researchers who wish to undertake feminist research.

Understanding women's experience

Feminist research seeks to understand the particularities of women's lives (Beckman, 2014; Brown, Western and Pascal, 2013). For this, qualitative approaches are valued because they are open-ended and allow for in-depth study; view women holistically within their environments or in light of their sociopolitical context; and use women's words; renaming women's experiences in their own terms is a hallmark of feminism (Orme, 2003). Although not the exclusive domain of, or the only approach to feminist research (many use quantitative research methods), qualitative, in-depth conversations and group discussions serve as a medium to gain rich detail in the women's stories we seek to explore.

In fostering understanding of women's experiences, feminist perspectives also 'carry messages of empowerment that challenge the encircling of knowledge claims by those who occupy privileged positions' (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 3).. Hence reflexivity, or being aware of the way in which our own position – class, race, status, culture, whiteness, privilege, and so on – affects the research process, is favoured (Daley, 2010). As feminist researchers, we acknowledge that certain voices have been silenced or distorted and we seek not only to understand women's experiences but also our experience as researchers and our influence on the research process

Improving women's lives

Feminist research is conducted against a critical analysis of the impact of women's oppression, a radical critique of the politics of (male) domination and a history of activism (Ackerley and True, 2010). It has a particular ethical bias oriented toward compassion and an ethic of care (Preissle, 2007). Also, it generally has a social justice and emancipatory agenda: 'Feminist research challenges contemplative spectator research by virtue of being openly political, connected, and involved in liberatory actions' (Gringeri et al., 2010, p. 393). At times this presents challenges for researchers as they navigate the tension between seeking social change and obtaining valid knowledge (Gringeri et al., 2010). For critical feminists,

working towards social justice for those marginalised and disadvantaged by unfair processes is central to research. Thus feminist research is actively engaged in challenging inequalities or injustices and improving women's lives (Gray, Davies and Agllias, 2014).

Equalising power

Like Marxism, feminism is a theory of power and its unequal distribution in society (Beckman, 2014). Feminists view the root cause of women's oppression and physical and psychological violence against women as the outcome of power inequities. In research, feminists seek to equalise or reduce power imbalances in the researcher-respondent relationship, viewing this as an ethical issue. They might add that we have an ethic of care – and of responsibility – to ensure that these power differentials are attended to, or at least taken into account, in the way we conduct our research. While the dynamics of power are ever present, Shore (2006) suggests researchers should aim for 'an equitable research process', wherein inclusive partnerships are created by 'leveling ... the playing field' (p. 15), to ensure participants' voices are heard, valued and respected throughout the research process.

Three feminist studies

Each of the PhD studies presented illustrates one of these guiding principles. In each study, the women's issues were central, the participants mainly women, and the data drawn from women's experience. Each PhD candidate was motivated by, and concerned with, promoting social justice for women and brought feminist knowledge to the research process (Morris, 2002). Each study was granted ethics clearance from the *University of Newcastle Ethics Committee*, which operates in accordance with the *Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007*.

We would each position ourselves as white, middle-class, women engaged in doctoral research. We were each raised in Australia, albeit across three different generations (Jennifer during the 1980s and 1990s, Kylie during the 1970s and 1980s and Leanne during the 1960s and 1970s). We share the privilege of race, heterosexuality, and able-bodied-ness along with those provided by education and career opportunities. Within our families of origin, our early exposure to feminism differs widely and may reflect the generational difference between us, accompanied by the different waves of feminism within Australia (Gray and Boddy, 2010). Our experiences range from a complete absence of feminism to its central importance in

family life. Each of us has been exposed further to feminism via our engagement in education. The complex dynamics to which we have each been exposed as social workers at the intersection of poverty, marginalisation, homelessness, and violence, experienced particularly by women, have reinforced and expanded our early experiences. Despite our different experiences, we share a commitment to social justice. The place and importance of feminism has grown for each of us with our respective exposure to issues arising from the women's liberation and civil and human rights movements, coupled with our changing social expectations as women. Each of us has benefitted from the experiences of women who have played an important mentoring role in our respective lives and careers.

Capturing women's experience: Researching the sensitive issue of family estrangement (Kylie's voice)

Research is considered sensitive if it has the potential to: sanction participants by revealing stigmatising information; illuminate taboo topics; expose and challenge power relations; and if it has legal implications or causes guilt, shame, or the reopening of long-buried memories (Volker, 2004). These elements also create added tensions about accurately reporting vulnerabilities and injustices in ways that minimise the future falsification or misrepresentation of such findings in larger society. The principles of feminist-informed research align well with sensitive research with potentially vulnerable populations (Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong, 2008), such as my study of intergenerational family estrangement. Family estrangement occurs when a family member stops or reduces contact with one or more other members due to decreased affection, disagreement or conflict (Agllias, 2011, 2014). My study sought to understand the lived experience of older people estranged from their adult-children and how they defined, explained and made sense of this experience. Given qualitative approaches are recognised as the most useful way to gather data in sensitive research (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2010), I employed a methodology grounded in the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which offered a flexible research design that required extended engagement and placing the person experiencing the phenomenon central to the research. Twenty-five participants, aged between 61 and 80 years, who were estranged from adult children, were recruited. Forty-one estrangements were current at the time of the first interview, ranging from five months to 43 years duration (with an average duration of 15.5 years). Two in-depth interviews were conducted with most

participants, while some participants used diaries to record additional data. I also used a journal to record field notes and methodological decision making.

Family estrangement is a conceptually complex and under-researched phenomenon. However, many participants experienced it as a significant, unresolvable and traumatic loss, a situation exacerbated by its ambiguous nature and social disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement was particularly pertinent for female participants, closely linked to heterosexist and gendered ideologies about parenting, particularly motherhood. Essentialist social constructions of *motherhood as natural* often fuelled participants' beliefs that estrangement was *unnatural* by comparison. Female participants often spoke about estrangement as a stigmatised and isolating experience they were unable to share with others for fear of judgement and ostracisation. This was generally different for men, who reported being more open about the estrangement and feeling less stigmatised in social situations. Therefore, I was cognisant of not viewing these experiences independently of social processes. It was imperative to investigate how patriarchal ideologies affected the power relations within families, while also focusing on their personal impact.

Under these conditions, the collection of sensitive data about family estrangement posed potential risks to participants, including exposure, shame and reliving traumatic events and memories. It also had the potential to benefit or empower the participant, by giving voice to social taboos, hidden knowledge, or silenced experiences (Gray and Agllias, 2013). Being dedicated to a participant-led interview process focused on trust and rapport, I followed the location, timing and process preferred by the participant. Participants were encouraged to share their story through open-ended and narrative questions that engendered curiosity and encouraged reflection, while assessing, discussing and planning for ongoing participant safety (Agllias, 2011). Participant feedback indicated this interviewing technique supported the recollection of painful memories in a way that was ultimately transformative for many.

The analysis of data was conducted using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which presupposed participants' desire to engage in making sense of their own experience through reflection and dialogue. It involved the examination of participants' detailed accounts of their sociohistorical experience and the meanings they attributed to them. The second interview also served as a *member checking* opportunity, where participants gave feedback about my preliminary analysis and assisted me to advance my understanding of their experiences.

As such, the study offered a rich, detailed and nuanced description of the estrangement experience and provided a foundation for a longer-term research and policy

agenda: 'Feminist thinking and practice require taking steps from the "margins to the center" while eliminating boundaries that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known' (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 3). To this end, the ongoing dissemination strategy has included academic, professional and popular media, such as journal articles, workshops for human service workers and radio interviews, in an effort to enable social change for estranged family members.

Improving women's lives: The Map Your Future project (Jennifer's voice)

The *Map Your Future* mentoring project reflects the second guiding principle to improve women's lives. It was informed by a social intervention research framework loosely modelled on the work of Rothman and Thomas (1994). It aimed to develop knowledge about mentoring, while also designing, implementing and evaluating a mentoring program that was instigated by community members. Eighteen women mentees commenced the mentoring program and 13 completed the preparation-for-mentoring. Of these, 11 entered the next phase, where they were matched with a mentor. Data collection methods were predominantly qualitative and included transcripts of group meetings, interviews, including unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and surveys; journal notes documenting emails, phone calls, and observations of participants; and meeting minutes. All of this data formed the 'text' for analysis. Quantitative measures included participant demographic data and scales measuring self-esteem, hope and optimism (Mehrabian, 1998), social support (Everingham, C. R., personal communication, March 3, 2005), and ego-resilience (Block and Kremen, in Letzring, Block and Funder, 1998).

Before commencing the mentoring program, preliminary research was undertaken with women in local communities to investigate their perception and understanding of mentoring and what they wanted so as to establish a shared understanding and project agenda (Langan and Morton, 2009). It was agreed that the mentoring program would: (i) create pathways for women to fulfil their aspirations; (ii) use participatory approaches to involve women in the design of the mentoring program; and (iii) assess its outcomes (see Boddy, Agllias, Gray et al, 2008; Boddy, Agllias and Gray, 2012).

I was mindful of feminist critiques that mentoring sought to make mentees fit into discriminatory, unequal systems (Humble, Richards, Solomon et al., 2006) and perpetuated patriarchy in the workplace (Dua, 2007; Hansman, 2001), since mentoring studies often excluded women's voices and generalised from mixed-sex populations. I wanted to avoid an

approach that perpetuated power inequities and discriminatory practices and instead build mentees' resilience in non-stigmatising and non-judgemental ways to promote *socially-just practice* (McCashen, 2005). I employed a feminist-strengths approach, which drew heavily from structural – anti-oppressive – feminism, and was cognisant that structural barriers would hamper women's personal development and social progression in educational and career attainment (Bok, 2004). This limited social mobility prevented many low-income women from attaining gainful employment and accessing essential social resources (Green, 2013; Scheuler, 2014). More than this, a 'feminist-strengths' perspective enabled me to recognise that, despite structural disadvantages, the women displayed strengths and resilience (Saleebey, 2009), and had already achieved much in their lives. Hence I sought to recognise and appreciate the women's commitment and contribution to their caring roles cognisant of structural feminists' concern that, for many women, caring caused substantial emotional and physical distress (Lloyd, 2006). Thus, while valuing the labour of caretaking and childrearing, the program focused on the women's individual identities, goals and hopes, and invited them to reflect on their gendered experiences as culturally, historically and socially situated. Combining structural feminism with a focus on participant resilience and strengths led to an appreciation of the nuances and diversity of the women's experiences and allowed space for change.

A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and focus groups enabled me to: (i) get close to the women's experiences, (ii) ensure a range of methods sensitive to different literacy and language proficiency levels (Hansman, 2001); (iii) increase my understanding of participant differences and similarities (Spierings, 2012); and (iv) engage in reflexive analysis. In this way, I was able to be mindful of inherent biases, as 'intervention and feminist activism should not supersede, dilute, or compete with the mission of research ... to develop knowledge' (Gottlieb and Bombyk, 1987, p. 30). Quantitative measures, including strengths-based scales, maximised the study's reliability and relevance to the women's lives (Apodaca, 2009), while an understanding of gender relations and structural disadvantage helped me make sense of the data.

The study demonstrated the value of community-based individual and group mentoring. By the completion of the mentoring program, four of the eleven women had begun further study and an additional three had obtained gainful employment. Their career and educational interests had widened to incorporate non-traditional career aspirations. Almost all women reported positive changes in their self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, confidence, ego-resilience, general wellbeing, and social support systems (see Boddy, 2009).

Equalising power: The Safe At Home project (Leanne's voice)

The *Safe at Home* project was a creative heuristic mixed method study that included a nested empirical social intervention research project involving art, social work and social change (Gray and Schubert, 2009, 2010; Schubert, 2011a, 2011b). The study aimed to raise awareness of domestic and family violence using arts-based practice, by challenging pro-violence attitudes identified in a purposive pre-intervention community-wide survey. Simultaneously, the study aimed to examine the use of art as an intervention to raise awareness and challenge attitudes to domestic and family violence via a post-intervention neighbourhood survey, which reconfirmed dominant academic and popular wisdom that this continued to be a problem 'largely of violence *by men*, against women and children' (Flood, 2006, p. 1) Consequently, this research assumed an overt feminist change agenda (Foster, 2009).

A total of 18,473 households were surveyed via an unaddressed mail service and an 8.1% (n=1,505) return rate from community members aged over 18 years was secured. Respondents were predominantly female (82.4%) and Anglo-Celtic with only 1.7% identifying as Aboriginal. The majority of survey respondents were aged between 40 and 59 years.

The intervention phase of the study, while limited to 100 participants, drew from all parts of the general community aged between five and 90 years. Participants in this phase of the study were not required to disclose personal experiences of domestic and family violence. Demographic data was not gathered during this phase, however the majority of participants were children (more girls than boys), who were assisted in the art-making processes by a diverse group of women and a small group of men. Many of the participants lived on the housing estate where the project was based, and a group of Indigenous community members provided a significant contribution. Using participatory arts-based community development, in partnership with feminist and pro-feminist practitioners, the study attempted to share power in a way that encouraged participant involvement and decision making in all steps of the intervention phase. Five major artworks, two events, and the exhibition of artworks at various community locations focused on raising awareness of, and addressing negative attitudes contributing to, domestic and family violence.

The post-intervention neighbourhood survey was distributed to 200 households. Eight surveys were returned, yielding seven completed surveys, representing a 3.5% return rate. This survey was designed to collect comparable demographic data, community attitudes to

domestic and family violence, and responses to the artworks created through the intervention phase. Five of the seven respondents were female and two male. Indigenous Australians were over represented in this sample compared with the community-wide survey as three (42.9%) respondents identified as Aboriginal, which may reflect the high concentration of Aboriginal families living in public housing in the neighbourhood and the strong connections made with Aboriginal community members during the intervention phase. Though men and people in same-sex relationships with experience of domestic violence, and perpetrators of violence were free to participate, the experience of these diverse groups was not the focus of this study.

Enabling the expression of marginalised female voices and highlighting taken-for-granted ideas (Huss, 2007), arts-based approaches are consistent with qualitative feminist research. Combining a feminist standpoint with an arts-based approach set the research frame to balance the power dynamic between researcher and researched. Art disrupts dominant social discourses that marginalise and silence women (Clover, 2011), captures the multifaceted reality of women's lives, and helps guard against the 'dominance of Western style words and talk in research imaginations' (Huss, 2007, p. 981). These features were fundamental to greater sharing and the participation of Indigenous women and their children.

Arts-based research was 'not neutral but [sought] to identify and disrupt inequitable knowledge/power patterns' (Carson and Pajaczkowska, 2001, p. 9). It was an inherently political, feminist act. Critical feminist theory sees violence against women as one facet of women's subordination in a patriarchal society that is a crucial focus of feminist research. Exposed to the radical feminism of the late 1960s and 1970s (Fudge, 2006), I developed an early feminist consciousness, which I brought to bear upon a long-held practice concern. Researching this issue without feminist principles was politically unimaginable (Bird, 2010).

Conducive to social and political change, a feminist-pragmatist understanding of transformation (Fischer, 2010) allowed the creation of a viable, alternative, early intervention strategy that fostered greater social justice for women. By promoting the safety and interests of women, balanced against men's engagement in non-violence against women, the project strengthened attempts to challenge oppressive structures, relationships and practices that stifle participation and silence women's voices, while highlighting the centrality of male power.

Using a feminist ethic of care (Lloyd, 2006), the equalisation of power was sought by positioning myself as artist-social worker-researcher. As a co-subject, I worked in collaborative, participatory and change-oriented ways where my experience was researched

alongside that of my participants. As a participant-researcher, I could be accountable, share decision-making and reduce the power divide between myself and the participants (Allen, 2011). Power was redirected from the teacher [researcher] to the learner [participant] in the art-making process. This enabled co-learning and repositioned me from being a 'single expert to [being part of the] group' (Clover, 2011, p. 21). Power was further levelled through group process, debate and collective decision-making (Clover, 2007).

Feminist traditions of consciousness-raising and 'the personal is political' were combined with a commitment to pursuing women's common interests, experiences, interests, needs, and goals (Allen, 2011) in the research process to create collectively imagined community artwork based on images of, and conversations about, safe home environments gathered from participants (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Community artwork depicted in the mosaic.

Mirroring feminist research and supervisory practices

Student experience: Jennifer, Kylie and Leanne

As women embarking on a doctoral research journey, each with an already established feminist consciousness, it was natural that each of us sought feminist-oriented supervisors (Fischer, 2010). However, we believe this is no less true of individuals holding an established consciousness venturing into new territory. Each of us turned to other feminists for advice and insights, and affirmation of our actions, beliefs and ideals. We believe that feminist awareness often develops retrospectively, with past experiences now understood through a stronger feminist worldview, or prospectively as we learn and renew our feminist insights. We chose to enter the feminist community to ensure feminist responses to our actions and thoughts would enable ‘future feminist—rather than sexist—acts’ (Fischer, 2010, p. 76). This sentiment was reflected in the supervisory relationship and extended into the PhD support group, established by Mel, in which each of us participated and shared our experiences.

The feminist-informed supervision we experienced, and facilitated by three female supervisors (Mel as the principal supervisor for each student, Jill Gibbons as co-supervisor for Kylie and Jennifer, and Anne Graham as co-supervisor for Leanne), often mirrored the feminist research practices already discussed. The supervision we each received acknowledged and honoured our experiences, allowed space for reflexivity, improved our academic careers, and minimised power differences between us and our supervisors.

Acknowledging and honouring the student experience

When doctoral students choose research topics their interest in, experience of, or passion for, a particular area or issue often initially inspires and directs their research agenda. As doctoral researchers, intricately bound by the co-construction of knowledge with our participants, we became increasingly aware of the importance of supervision that: (i) acknowledged our existing experiences and expertise, (ii) supported reflection and critique of these experiences, and (iii) encouraged the meaning-making processes associated with co-constructed knowledge.

Consistent with a feminist framework, our supervisors acknowledged that ‘caring for one another’s work and ideas involves caring for the lives that influence and inform our work’ (Goeke, Klein, Garcia-Reid et al., 2011, p. 217). In having supervisors who were interested in our often negotiated experiences, and who, in some instances, encouraged us to journal our initial presuppositions, beliefs and values, we were well-positioned to hear the

stories of others. Supervision that supported reflection on the interviewing or art-making experience and assisted ongoing reflection was imperative in improving data collection techniques and, particularly, the analysis of detailed, complex and sometimes conflicting sources of data. The very skills used to carefully elicit information from our participants were applied in an enquiring and non-judgemental supervision experience that was open to new ideas, exploration and ongoing reassessment.

Improving student's lives through academic mentoring and guidance

Feminist mentoring in academic settings can be challenging in its dual role to support the junior staff member's acculturation to the University, which can unwittingly maintain unhelpful status quos, while, at the same time, question patriarchal and oppressive practices that disadvantage women (Dua, 2007; Humble et al., 2006). It was important that this was managed effectively in our supervisory relationships so that we could overcome the struggles associated with operating within, and responding to, what were, at times, unfamiliar and confusing systems. Through regular meetings, responsiveness to difficult questions, introductions to other academics, support to navigate university systems, and transitioning our relationships from mentor/mentee to peer/colleague, supervision operated in a distinctly relational feminist manner.

One core element of supervision that improved our professional lives was provided by Mel, who regularly promoted our work to senior academics and showed us the techniques of writing for publication. Writing for publication was often a collaborative process involving considerable trust on the part of the supervisor, who encouraged, stretched and held faith in our capacity to write and grow. Mel imbued this process with a passion for learning, and an infectious desire to create and share new knowledge and ideas.

Through advocacy and mentoring, the supervisory relationship provided more than a doctorate, and assisted the establishment of successful academic careers under patriarchal conditions. Chesney-Lind, Okamoto and Irwin (2006) state that feminist mentors in universities provide 'survival skills' as they approach:

this activity within the long history of feminist activism including a dedication to analyzing and fighting systems of oppression in every sphere, collaboration, non-exploitation, and, most importantly, understanding that the personal relationships that we form have enormous political potential (p. 16).

As part of this, our supervisors challenged our ideas about conceptual frameworks and raised our consciousness of personal feminist interests, biases and perspectives, and how these influenced the research we conducted. Such discussions required us to question our assumptions and consequently develop a robust theoretical perspective rather than blindly accept a single feminist approach. Thus it was important that the feminist mentoring within the supervisory relationship focused not only on the experience of working in academe, but also on the process of undertaking sensitive feminist research.

Equalising power between supervisor and student

Supervision that acknowledged our gendered experiences as aspiring academics, partners, parents and/or carers was imperative in equalising power in the supervisory relationship and developing strategies to improve our lives inside and outside of the research project. Complex issues of power in the student-supervisor relationship had to be acknowledged, monitored and discussed authentically. As acknowledged by Humble et al. (2006), a hierarchy of knowledge can be balanced well by collaborative relationships and the reflexive analysis of power, particularly where supervisor self-disclosure and working towards social change are evident.

The feminist shift from a hierarchical, competitive and objective learning and work environment to a learning community of trust, caring, cooperation, and acknowledgement was also epitomised in a PhD support group (Goeke et al., 2011). In many ways, the PhD support group mirrored the group process that occurred within the mentoring program (see Boddy et al., 2008). It operated as a space in which participants felt a sense of belonging as we shared our common experience of study. It thus offered relief from the individual burden of responsibility inherent in completing a PhD often experienced by candidates. This sense of connection led to enduring support networks between group members after we completed our PhDs. As witnesses to one another's experience, we empathised and jointly problem solved to encourage a greater sense of control over our respective studies. Ultimately, we shared, witnessed, affirmed, and supported one another to complete our studies and fulfil our responsibilities to participants and other community organisations.

Supervisor's experience: Some parting words from Mel

The student-supervisor relationship at a postgraduate level is a form of mentoring that can engender enthusiasm, not only for research, but also for forms of feminist theorising that open heretofore unexamined avenues of exploration (Brown et al., 2013; Dua, 2007; Hudnall, 2003). Working with these three women at different stages of their lives, and watching them

encountering and negotiating their family roles, life crises and intellectual challenges while conducting their PhD research made the lessons of feminist theory all the more real. I became acutely aware of how a feminist perspective for each student resonated with their various experiences at work, in the family and in the educational setting, the space in which we met and which set the parameters of our supervisory relationship. I have always impressed on my students that the purpose of all research is the generation of new knowledge but there are many forms of research, notably feminist and Indigenous research, which are not merely interested in 'knowledge for its own sake'. At a certain point in each study, I highlighted for each student how, given that each of their studies focused mainly on women's issues and involved female participants, they might begin to think about what a feminist perspective might bring to their study. I conveyed my understanding that *feminism is primarily for and about women* and feminist research was research conducted from this particular standpoint. Hence it primarily concerned the production of knowledge that would further understanding of women's issues and experiences. I presented the case thus: Since the ultimate goal of their PhD research was to produce knowledge that would lead to change and improvement in the situation of women in their families, at work, in the community, and in society, how might a feminist perspective enrich their studies? For Kylie, this resonated potently in dominant views of family and women's roles, especially their relationships with their children. This was brought home vividly when Kylie's participants recounted how they felt socially isolated when their friends and contemporaries shared stories of their children and grandchildren and they had none to tell because they were estranged from them. For Jennifer, with her determination to show the strengths of the women in her study, who were battling against all odds to keep body and soul together, a feminist perspective firmly grounded her desire to see their aspirations for themselves beyond their roles as wives and mothers, and the limits of their own understanding of what was possible in improving their lives. Leanne, with her many years' experience in social work and community health, was acutely aware of feminist perspectives on family and domestic violence. This fit well with her participatory community approach, which was enriched by techniques of equalising power between herself and her female participants.

There is, of course, an important theme here in how I seek to work with my students: capturing the importance of the PhD experience for them, giving space for their ideas, creating an environment of openness and sharing, challenging them to improve at every turn, push a little further, try a little harder, make it perfect, or at least as perfect as possible! Most importantly, I encourage collegiality and sharing among my students. Kylie and Jennifer were contemporaries, and Kylie ran the mentoring groups in Jennifer's project. I have always been

struck by the way in which students' intersecting experiences could build the grounds for collegiality and sharing that would enrich each other's work. By highlighting these connections, they have benefitted from one another in more ways than I could imagine, and I have thus promoted peer mentoring among my students (see Davis, Provost and Clark, 2012).

Thus, in addition to our individual supervision, sometime back with a colleague I began a PhD support group in which students discussed their research and came to support one another in sharing readings on methodology and information about useful resources that had helped them through their research, as well as very practical tips on recording devices, copy editors, computer programs, and so on. In that way, I facilitated the introduction of group mentoring where members could brainstorm solutions, validate one another's experiences, and draw on multiple points of view. Within this supportive and collaborative network, nothing has delighted me more than seeing Kylie, Jennifer and Leanne, along with other fine young women, blossom into committed researchers and academics.

Conclusion

Our experience of research and supervision from a feminist perspective heightened our sensitivity to the subjects of our research and one another as women seeking to balance work and family life in often not-too-convivial situations for the dilemmas we face and our myriad roles and responsibilities. The students and supervisors about whom we write were all white and privileged seeking to enter into the worlds of women with very different life experiences. Without the guiding feminist principles we have outlined in our paper, we would not have had the same predisposition and sensitivity towards our research and supervision. What we have experienced through our respective PhD journeys has been the enormous potential of collegiality, of sharing in one another's trials and successes, of being there for one another, and of caring for one another. These are not aspects of academic life that are highly valued but cushion us against its less-friendly sides. Supervision has enormous potential to create this culture of care and supervisors have a duty of care to their students (Cree, 2012). Like therapy, supervision peels away layers and replaces them with new perspectives that throw us out of our comfort zones. Supervisors need empathy to carry students through these periods of intense learning and the reward is the tremendous growth and sense of fulfillment students feel at the end of their PhD journey. This approach to supervision comes from a deeply-engrained feminist sensitivity such that it seems redundant to say what makes it feminist

other than to reiterate it is supervision done with women, by women, with women's interests at heart and therein lies the secrets of its success.

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