Mentoring, women and the construction of academic identities

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the influence of mentoring on the formation of the identities of women academics in Australian universities. Many Australian and New Zealand universities have introduced some form of mentoring initiative for women academics over the last decade. The aim of these initiatives is usually expressed in terms of supporting women’s career development in order to increase the representation of women in senior positions in universities.

I take up Foucault’s theory of governmentality together with feminist theories of subjectivity, to examine the ways in which mentoring contributes to ‘producing’ the women as academic subjects of the times. My analysis of the formation of the subjectivities of the women concerned is set in the context of a political economy of contemporary higher education accompanied by the changing nature of academic work. I argue that mentoring has found support in recent years because it responds to the concerns of ‘the enterprise university’ with improving performance while also being seen to respond to the problem of gender inequality.

The thesis is based on interviews conducted with 17 women academics who have participated in a formal mentoring program or who have been mentored informally by a colleague in their universities, six of which are discussed in detail. I use a feminist interpretive framework to analyse the discourses through which the women and I construct their accounts at interview. I also highlight the parallels between the confessional aspects of feminist research interviewing and the confessional space of the mentoring relationship itself, particularly mentoring of women by women.

On the basis of this analysis, I argue that mentoring has a number of productive effects, producing particular sorts of self-regulating subjects, together with new knowledges and discourses of work and of the self. In their engagement in mentoring, the women take up a project of self-review and self-regulation. This can be understood as a biographical project of the self. It is a project that is iterative and ongoing, as the women navigate the discourses of academic work, career,
gender, mothering, sexuality, social class and ethnicity, amongst others. This process is frequently fragmented and contested as the women confront the contradictions within the combined positioning of themselves and their positioning by others. Rather than try to resolve the tensions and contradictions that characterise this process, these tensions might be better explored in terms of their productive potential for disrupting the gendered work order of universities.
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I have changed the names of participants and some identifying details in line with my commitment to ensure confidentiality.

I have indented quotations from publications in the text in the same size font as the main text.

Quotations from interview transcripts are indented in the text in italics.

I have also used italics from time to time to emphasise a point.