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Some Feminist Concerns in an Age of Networking

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As final copy of this chapter was to be retyped, a colleague of mine who knew that I was writing about networking brought to my attention an article in that day's *Boston Globe*. There, just above an article entitled, "Science Closer to the Secrets of Longer Life" was the headline, "Rubin's New Revolution: Networking." The erstwhile Yippie, Jerry Rubin, had discovered networking. I immediately recomposed this introductory paragraph: for if networking had reached Studio 54, the mid-Manhattan discotheque, now a business networking salon owned by Jerry Rubin, one did not have to belabor the point that networking, both as method and metaphor,[1] had hit an all-time popular high. Rubin's message is clear: Contacts—who you know—can change your life. Networking has become a metaphor for the pathway to power based on the patterns of American males. And what about women in this milieu? Rubin claims that in his "business networking salon" women are treated as professionals and busi-

1. The use of networking as both method and metaphor was borrowed from the title of Barry Wellman's working paper "Network Analysis: From Method and Metaphor to Theory and Substance." The paper was listed among the working paper series of the structural analysis program brochure (August 1982), Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 563 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Canada, M55 1R1.

ness people—talking business, exchanging ideas, and making those all-important contacts (*The Boston Globe,* Monday, January 3, 1983, p. 34).

Although particularly popular over the past two decades, the term *networking* has been in the lexicon of many disciplines for several decades. Because networks are the ties among the different spheres of an individual's social world, they have been of particular interest to those working and writing in the social sciences. As Kadushin suggests, networks are dynamic systems with one or more of the following flowing through them: objects, labor, affect, evaluation, knowledge, prescription and opinion, influence, and power. Networks can be formal and informal (Kadushin, cited in Koenig & Gogel, 1981). Networks have been used not only to locate jobs and to advance one's career and occupational goals but to locate pediatricians, child care, care for the elderly, automobile mechanics, friends, lovers, as well as emotional and psychological support. Laura Lein (1983) has noted the many ways in which networks can be used among the poor, black communities, and the elderly. In fact, networks have been studied not only as interpersonal community ties but as interlocking corporate directorates and the world economic order; network analysis comprises sophisticated methodologies and computer programs as well as theories of class and property relations.

In most of the current research and literature the term has been used in the most narrow career sense, particularly in relation to women. For instance, in their advice to women wishing to become executives, Hennig and Jardim (1978) counsel women, not only to have a definite five-year plan for the kind of job they want, but also to determine the kind of people they will need to know to reach that goal, what these people can do to help them, and whom those people know.

However, research has not yet provided conclusive evidence that networking for this purpose yields the results it promises. Speizer, for instance, recounts some of the methodological problems with existing mentor studies: "1) The numbers are too small to allow one to generalize from the findings. 2) The information collected is retrospective. 3) The concepts of mentor or sponsor are left undefined" (1981, p. 711). In fact, the results of such networking might even have deleterious effects on women. One must remember that networks may be not only a source of support and opportunities for individuals but also a source of demands and constraints. Lein (1983) notes that gossip, ostracism, and withdrawal of support can be used as methods of keeping individuals in line with conventional behavior. Koenig and Gogel (1981) note that such covert

network actions as group gossip, friendly advice, and informal decision making can be as powerful as overt economic force.

Networking, like its many synonymous terms—mentor, patron, sponsor, guide, godfather, and even rabbi—are generally used as metaphors for a process that lacks uniform operational definitions. Without clear definitions, the real effects of networking or the feminist implications of such a process have not been clearly understood or made explicit.

NETWORKING AND UPWARD MOBILITY: MENTORS AND PROTEGES

Speizer (1981) notes that male business executives have provided the data which has led to the recommendation that women acquire mentors. But some important issues are left unexamined if we blindly follow such tutelege. Does becoming a protégée also mean assuming the mentor's values? If, as is still the case in the most prestigious professions, such mentors are male, does it also mean accepting the male-oriented competitive achievement values generally associated with such mentors? A 1979 *Wall Street Journal* article reported that 70 percent of women's mentors were male (*Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 1979, p. 1). Many writers have acknowledged that to be accepted into the informal social circles important for upward mobility in the professions, one must become socially similar to those at the top—simulating similar life styles, mannerisms, and, most importantly, aspirations and values (Epstein, 1970; Hughes, 1945; Kanter, 1977; Kaufman, 1977). Bringing women into positions of leadership and authority through the current male-dominated network may simply mean the perpetuation of the current systems of authority and leadership. Most of those who currently serve as mentors are not particularly positive regarding women.

For instance, in Bass, Krusell, and Alexander's (1971) study, 174 male managers and staff personnel perceived women as unable to supervise men and less dependable than men. In a more current study of managers' perceptions of sex differences, particularly perceptions relevant to the promotion of women, Rosen and Jerdee (1978, p. 841) found that male managers and administrators uniformly held more negative perceptions of women compared with men on each of four scales: aptitudes, knowledge, skills; interest and motivation; temperament; work habits and attitudes. Generally, women were perceived as having aptitudes, skills, interests,

and motivations compatible with routine clerical roles, but not managerial ones.

Even in professions outside the world of business, such as academe, there are costs to be paid for mobility through male-dominated networks. Roger Collins[2] reflects on the concept of mentoring with regard to minority members and women academics. He concludes that to be a protégée, one has to be willing to ascribe to the social and intellectual legacy of the prospective mentor. The sex-biased nature of many of the intellectual theories and methodologies which structure our academic disciplines has been a feminist concern for well over a decade. Bringing women into positions of leadership and authority through a male filter may be too high a price for "making it."

Even if we were to hypothesize that women would bring a different sensibility once in positions of power (a very untested and unlikely hypothesis, especially if they ascend through male networks) the means to such ends may not be justified. For as Collins points out, mentors by definition are scarce and, as such, when potential mentees vie for scarce mentors, they undermine cooperative networking among themselves. As Laws (1975) pointed out when writing about the female token some years ago, in order to be one of the boys, the token occasionally must turn against the girls. Collins concludes that the intense competition generated among peers and an adherence to traditional belief systems "is analogous to colonialist strategies that require the colonized to abdicate their identity, their history, and their commitment to oppressed compatriots in order to receive colonial favors apparently crucial to their survival. The costs of establishing a professional identity forged in such a context needs to be acknowledged and assessed" (1982, p. 8).

WOMEN'S NETWORKS: TOWARD WHAT END?

Even if we were to agree with the commonsense but untested belief that mentoring or sponsorship is important for those on the rise, the mentoring process often embodies antithetical values to feminist sensibilities. Shapiro, Haseltine, and Rowe (1978) catalogue a list of problems associated with the mentor–mentee relationship. Do the very few women available as mentors or even role-models represent adequate or even appropriate female models from which we would want to build female networks? Even

2. Collins, R. Colonialism on campus: A critique of mentoring to achieve equity in higher education. Paper delivered to American Educational Research Association, March 19, 1982, New York.

if we had potential mentors and role-models, do we wish to imitate the hierarchical relationships implicit in any mentor–mentee relationship? Do we wish to imitate the intense, parental-like, if not patriarchal, quality of the relationship?

Mentoring would clearly have to change if we were to allay some feminist concerns about hierarchical relationships. Currently, the mentor–mentee relationship is not only socially restrictive but restricted in number as well. The attitudes, behavior, and personality characteristics currently valued in the male-dominated circles at the top do not allow for the diversity and alternative styles associated with what I have come to believe is a feminist model of success and professionalism—a style characterized more by cooperation than competition; more by teamwork than individualism; more by diversity than conformity; more by commitment to long-term effects than to short-term gains.

Many authors who offer critiques of the mentoring system have also offered suggestions for changing it. For instance, Shapiro et al. focus on the peer-pal or guide aspects of networking and mentoring. Using one's peers or those slightly higher in rank represents one way of learning the rules of the game while keeping the context more egalitarian. They argue that since there are more peers or persons closer in rank to new professionals, more mentoring can take place. Given each generation's changing needs, the authors suggest that new professionals need both men and women as "partial role models" in order to create "for themselves a composite ideal that represents the kind of professional toward which they aspire" (Shapiro et al., 1978, p. 54). In this way an aspiring professional can actively create (not passively accept) a role model for him/herself. In this way each can actively pick and choose the best qualities from each sex to carry him or her upward.

Collins (1982), too, argues for peer networking. He believes such alliances, particularly across institutions, are likely to provide members with a power base and access to more resources than would be available to any one individual. In fact, Collins argues that universities should provide opportunities for networking among minority and women faculty by offering resources for junior faculty to establish and maintain professional contacts, especially ones outside of the university. However, the overriding belief in our culture that individual achievement depends on individual motivation and hard work makes this cooperative approach to achievement in times of scarce resources highly unlikely. Given current conditions, it is far more likely that a well-placed mentor can muster more resources than can peer-pals.

Furthermore, there are perils associated with these "new order" networks even if we avoid some of the pitfalls of the established "old-boy" networks. While the motives for peer networking or for establishing women's networks may be quite good, they may ultimately deflect women from changing current conditions or keep women peripheral to the real centers of power. In a recent *New York Times* magazine article, Anna Quindlen (1980) characterizes some of the motives behind what she calls the clear growth and direction of networks in the 1980s.

> The networks are for women who are anxious to help others of their sex but who are unabashed about their own desire to advance. They are for women who feel secure enough to move forward but still have some lingering doubts about their progress and position that are best assuaged by others in their situation. They are for women whose feminism, if it can be called that, is often more social than political. They are for women who work with and have contacts with men but who are not sure those men are willing to recommend or guide them. Above all, they are for women who feel there are services, insights, and assistance that other women can offer that are different, even better, than those that men could provide. They are job markets and support groups, lecture clubs and lobbying organizations. Some are connections based on professional status, race, or home town. All, of course, are connections based on gender (p. 86).

Although women's networks may be different, perhaps even better than the support men provide for one another, it is important to examine the political implications of such female support. If women's networks are more social than political, as Quindlen implies, will "networked" women address the current economic, political, and social inequality that affects women? If old girl networks are composed of women who have already "made it", usually through old-boy networks, will these successful women work to create access for other women, or simply enjoy the comfort of achievement? Will new networks seriously challenge society's dominant views about women's worth, or merely by providing the illusion of change, serve inadvertently to delay women's access to the significant centers of power?

Indeed, closer inspection of at least two of the most prestigious women's networks described in Quindlen's article leaves one unsure about just what it is that can be accomplished through networking. The women interviewed in Quindlen's article hypothesized that much good came from their mutual association, but they also admitted that they could not specify

the exact consequences of such networking. Furthermore, Quindlen notes that by the time women might be nominated to join the prestigious Women's Media Group (a group limited to 140 members) or the Women's Forum, they probably do not need the support mechanisms such networks are thought to supply. For these women, learning the ropes or devising alternative strategies to open opportunities are not as important as simply relaxing in the company of other women. While such comfortability may provide a relaxed informal atmosphere, it might also provide a false sense of change and overall accomplishment. While such networks may bear some similarities to men's networks, they surely should not be construed as equal to those of men. Jane Gould, the director of the Women's Center at Barnard College, notes that although members of several women's networks were asked by the Reagan administration to recommend women for government positions, the high-ranking positions went to those women who were part of the most powerful men's networks (cited in Quindlen, p. 100). Gould warns in this same article that until we have many more women in decision making roles, we will not gain from networking what men gain (p. 100). She does not deny that the support we can give one another is a wonderful thing, but she cautions with the following: "I don't think anyone should fool themselves that because they know the 100 most powerful women in America, they know the 100 most powerful people" (p. 100).

Indeed my own study of academic women provided some similar data. The women I interviewed had markedly different colleague networks than men. The composition of their networks differed from that of men, with women having access to fewer colleagues in decision-making roles than did men. Their networks also served different purposes. Males used their colleagues more for professional contacts and less for friendship support than did women (Kaufman, 1978).

If we remain in separate networks from men, we may also remain isolated from the arenas wherein change can take place. I am not arguing that women's networks are not valuable. Networking among women can be a very important strategy and a potentially powerful force in boosting our own self-image. Networks can provide some important sources of information and help raise, to a public level, inequities once suffered as personal and as individual problems. But it is not a panacea for all of women's (or for that matter anyone's) political, social, and economic ills (for a more detailed account of women's current professional status, see Kaufman, 1983). What might be most damaging about separate networking for men and women is that separate networks might serve to emphasize rather than integrate

feminine values into the corporate or professional culture. We must come to know our strengths and values not as different from men's (for then men become the norm) but as normative guides for human behavior. Our sensibilities must be valued by more than women in their networks—by the population at large. Networking is not enough unless we can collectively change existing institutions and the powerful bonds that maintain the status quo.

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