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Re-imagining mentoring programs from privilege to equality – intervening in academic gaze orders

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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual article discusses academic mentoring programs from a Foucauldian power-knowledge analysis. How is mentoring entangled in the rationalities of the privileging and de-privileging gaze in academia? How does this power/knowledge imply organizational marginalizations and exclusions for Blacks and People of Color (BiPoc) female academics? The article proposes to discuss privileging and de-privileging as a discursive practice creating visibilities and invisibilities. It identifies the need to transform institutional gaze orders and explores how epistemic interventions may support such transformations. By understanding and designing mentoring programs as innovation labs, universities can be supported in shifting the gaze toward an ontology and epistemology of institutional solidarity and care.

Design/methodology/approach – From a Foucauldian perspective, the discursive "gaze" constitutes the other, producing differentiated and "othering" subject positions that privilege some while marginalizing others. This analytical lens enables an examination of the rationalities underlying institutional practices – particularly those that enact exclusion. From a Foucauldian perspective, we see innovation labs as discursive interventions into and potential openings of institutional gaze orders.

Findings – This article adopts a power/knowledge-critical, epistemic perspective and proposes a transformative design approach to mentoring programs for female academics. It conceptualizes knowledge orders as contested terrains that both constrain and enable shifts in subject positions through discursive practices. From this perspective, the often invisible, exclusionary mechanisms embedded in mentoring programs for women scholars are brought to light. Moreover, this approach advocates for discursive interventions into institutional gaze orders. By actively confronting discursive gaze orders of privilege and exclusion and engaging various stakeholders in mentoring programs, mentoring can become a starting point for re-imagining gaze orders – opening space for discursive innovation and institutional transformation.

Originality/value – Little research exists on the exclusionary practices of mentoring programs despite the declining proportions of female academics with international, migration or BiPoC backgrounds. Moreover, studies suggest little attention to institutional change in mentoring programs and criticize insufficient focus on intersectional perspective on gender equality. Our approach contributes to a broader understanding of how institutional mentoring programs and practices can be re-imagined as vehicles for epistemic transformation.

Keywords Mentoring, Higher education, Gender, Race, Power/knowledge, Gaze orders, Critical whiteness
Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Privilege, as studies demonstrate, exists in many ways in higher education institutions and is reproduced in academic practices. An example of this is the master-student relationship in German academia in which a professor promotes his student in academia (Weber, 2009 [1919]). Mentors play a pivotal role by providing symbolic and social capital, facilitating access to professional networks and creating career opportunities (Heffron, 2020) that have benefited men for a long time. While these mentoring opportunities (for men) were mainly informal, formal mentoring programs for women have been established in German

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universities since the 1990s as part of their gender equality initiatives to increase the representation of female academics. However, various studies on mentoring programs for women in academia criticize those programs for failing to address and change existing institutional discrimination within organizations (Vries, 2012; Harris, 2022). Instead, they foster an adaptive learning process for women without organizational innovation and transformation (Schlüter and Berkels, 2014). Moreover, research on mentoring also highlights that especially white privileges are reproduced, simultaneously marginalizing other groups, such as Black and People of Color (BiPoC) academics, who have distinct needs within mentoring programs and mentoring relationships (Thomas, 2001; Cobb-Roberts and Esnard, 2023; King and Upadhyay, 2022).

In this article, we focus on the intersection of gender and race/migration. While women in German academia are underrepresented and hold only about 28% of professorships (CHE, 2024), female BiPoC academics remain even more underrepresented at critical thresholds, such as transitioning to doctoral studies, postdoctoral roles and professorships (Kortendiek *et al.*, 2022, p. 282). Among university professors and leadership positions, the proportion of individuals with a migration background [1], as well as BiPoC, decreases further and stands at approximately 12% (Engel, 2021, p. 140).

As Acker (2006) has pointed out, organizations are places for reproducing inequality regimes in the way they institutionalize gender, race and class in their symbolic order. This also holds true for higher education institutions such as universities. In this article, we propose an epistemological perspective on inequalities and privileges that is grounded in the work of Foucault and takes intersectional feminist and critical whiteness theories into consideration. Our starting point is that the underrepresentation of minorities, such as women and especially women BiPoC scholars, in academia is the effect of discursive practices. This perspective does not consider underrepresentation in academia as a merely empirical phenomenon, but as the effects of power/knowledge. Foucault argues that knowledge is always shaped by power. What counts as "true" is thus not determined by objective reality, but by dominant discourses – i.e. "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49) – which bring about specific speakabilities and visibilities through gaze orders (Foucault, 1978). Building on Foucault's notion of power/knowledge and discourses as an epistemic perspective, i.e. a perspective that focuses on the processes of how knowledge is produced, justified and understood, we understand gender and race in academia not as static categories but as discursively produced positions that are shaped by intersecting and contested power relations (Wieners and Weber, 2020). This perspective thus offers to both analyze and design discursive openings and closings.

In this article, we apply this perspective to mentoring programs for women in academia to propose new strategies for promoting intersectional gender equality in higher education institutions. We enquire how mentoring is entangled in the rationalities of the privileging and de-privileging gaze in academia and how this power/knowledge implies organizational marginalizations and exclusions for women and especially BiPoC women scholars. More specifically, we ask: Which gaze orders underlie existing studies on mentoring, how do they shape the way mentoring programs are conceptualized and practiced, and how can we intervene in them? Our goal is to offer an alternative vision that re-thinks mentoring not as individualizing relationship that promotes adaptive learning to "male" and "white" practices (Sandager, 2021). Coming from feminist perspectives on mentoring (Moss *et al.*, 1999, p. 414), we propose that discourse-analytical and design-oriented perspectives – exemplified by participatory innovation labs – can help intervene in institutionalized gaze orders (Weber and Heidelmann, 2021).

We argue as follows: In section 2, we introduce a perspective on privileges, drawing on Foucault's concept of the gaze and enriching it through intersectional feminist perspectives. Drawing on these, we show in section 3 how universities are not neutral but white and male spaces and how this constitutes exclusion, not only but also in gender equality and diversity initiatives such as mentoring programs. Finally, based on our epistemic approach, we

introduce re-thinking mentoring programs as innovation labs in section 4. This approach aims to re-think and re-imagine mentoring programs from individualizing learning to systemic discursive interventions in higher education institutions.

2. Privilege as a discursive and epistemic formation

Academic visibility – through publications, conferences, grants and institutional recognition – is a central condition for participation and advancement in the academic field. Yet, as Wieners and Weber (2020) emphasize, visibility is never merely an individual achievement, nor is it evenly distributed. Rather, visibility itself is a site of struggle, mediated by social, institutional and epistemic orders (Bacevic, 2023). Drawing on Foucault's epistemology of power/knowledge and the concept of *dispositif*, this section explores how privilege functions as a discursive and onto-epistemic practice.

In his later work, Foucault (1978, p. 94f.) conceives of power not as something possessed, but as a dynamic and relational force circulating through *dispositifs* and discourses. Discourses, according to Foucault (1972), determine what can be said, who can speak and how people are recognized as meaningful subjects. That means discourses are powerful as they bring objects, subjects and forms of knowledge into being. Discourses are part of the dispositif, which according to Foucault (1977, p. 299) is a heterogeneous ensemble composed of discourses, institutional arrangements, regulatory practices, architectural designs, legal frameworks and material infrastructures. The dispositif is a network of elements whose interactions generate power/knowledge and determine the conditions under which discourses can emerge and circulate – i.e. what can be said and who can be a meaningful subject. Deleuze (1992, p. 166) further elaborates on the dispositif as an "optical machine," shaping what and who appears within the institutional field of vision; i.e. it shapes what is visible and what is invisible. The dispositif functions through the gaze, constituting gaze orders – regimes of looking and being looked at – that not only classify but also constitute academic subjects.

The gaze, therefore, is not neutral. It is an effect of power/knowledge that produces particular ways of seeing, knowing and being. That means, it shapes how we see, understand and exist. These gaze orders generate subject positions through which individuals are interpellated and constituted as academic subjects. In academic settings, people are recognized as scholars, experts or professionals according to institutional and epistemic rules. The privileges that accompany visibility – access, credibility, legitimacy – are thus not equally distributed but are the outcomes of contested visual and epistemic orders (Bacevic, 2023).

From this perspective, privilege is thus not a fixed attribute or possession. Instead, it emerges from power/knowledge, and the gaze orders it produces. These gaze orders can result in epistemic oppression and hence silencing and invisibilizing some (Spivak, 1988). Such practices often reinforce the authority of those already at the center of dominant knowledge systems. That means, privileges work on two levels. Ontologically, they determine who is seen as a legitimate subject of knowledge, who can participate in knowledge production and whose voice is considered credible (Kilomba, 2010). Epistemically, they shape what counts as valid knowledge, which methods are considered rigorous, and which epistemologies are marginalized or excluded (Santos, 2014). In this way, privilege is both a condition and a result of the academic order.

Crucially, privileges are often rendered invisible to those who benefit from them. As Ahmed (2012) points out, privilege allows some bodies to move more easily through institutional spaces – not because institutions are neutral, but because the institutions are already oriented toward certain bodies. This is the paradox of privilege: it is most powerful where it is least visible. It becomes normalized, naturalized and depoliticized. From this perspective, the struggle over visibility is also a struggle over epistemic privilege. As Kilomba (2010) writes, epistemology "defines not only what true scholarship is, but also whom to believe and whom to trust" (Kilomba, 2010, p. 29). Who can speak and be visible in academia – and under what conditions – is not simply a matter of individual merit but of discursive

legibility and institutional recognition. As Ndlovu-Gatshemi (2020) writes, it is a question of where one is situated on the "epistemic line," which marks the boundary of whose ways of knowing are acknowledged and valued and whose are dismissed.

In the following section, we will expand this epistemic perspective on academia and higher education institutions in which visibilities and invisibilities are created.

3. Institutionalized gaze orders in academia and academic mentoring programs for (gender) equality

The structures of higher education and academic knowledge production are shaped by specific gaze orders that render certain subject positions intelligible, authoritative and legitimate, while systematically marginalizing or erasing others. These gaze orders are the effects of dispositifs, which organize what can be seen, said and known. Foucault developed three *dispositifs*, which he calls representation, normalization and disciplinary:

(1) *Representation:* Foucault (1966) analyzes this as the classical *dispositif* in the 17th and 18th centuries. It describes a vision that understands and categorizes knowledge along a system of similarities and differences. Objects in the world are represented through concepts, words and images, so knowledge is created by establishing a clear relationship between the object being represented and the sign representing it. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (1966, p. 134ff.) illustrates this with the work of botanists like Linnæus. Plants were meticulously catalogued and characterized according to observable characteristics, such as the number and arrangement of petals, and grouped into genera and species. However, this *dispositif* is also in transformation, as Foucault shows through his analysis of *Las Meninas*, in which the classical order of representation begins to dissolve. In the painting, the king and queen appear only as reflections in a mirror, while the painter and the spectator become part of the scene itself (Foucault, 1966, p. 4).

(2) *Disciplinary:* Foucault analyzes the visual regime of discipline in the Benthamite prison design of the 19th century (Foucault, 2020). In this setup, the guard can constantly observe the inmates from a central watchtower, without them knowing whether they are being watched at any given moment. This invisible, potential surveillance leads the inmates to discipline themselves, always considering the possibility of observation.

(3) *Normalization:* This visual regime is expressed through techniques of measurement and comparison, which define what is perceived as "normal" and merged at the beginning of the 19th century (Foucault, 1978, p. 104f.). For example, Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* how the gaze of the "modern" sciences has set and produced the norms of the social body, focusing on the sexuality of women, who are classified as either "normal" or deviant. In this *dispositif*, the norm leads, and the subject internalizes this "normality," aligning their actions accordingly.

The introduction of the *dispositifs* reveals that academia and universities were never neutral but have always been deeply entangled in modern society's knowledge production, especially concerning gender and race (Harding, 2008). In the following, we show how these *dispositifs* bring about certain visibilities and speakabilities – especially at the intersection of gender and race in academia.

3.1 Dispositif of representation: hypervisibility and epistemic invisibility

These epistemic orders rely on visual-discursive practices that discipline subjects and delimit what can be seen and known. Marginalized scholars often carry the dual burden of hypervisibility (as tokens of diversity) and marginalization (as voices lacking authority),

caught within academic regimes that both highlight and silence them. Kilomba, drawing on Spivak's (1988) concept of epistemic violence [2], points out that such scholars are often rendered visible solely as representatives of difference, while their epistemic agency is constrained or altogether silenced. Women and scholars of color, for instance, often become hypervisible in diversity discourses or as objects of study, while remaining structurally invisible in terms of authorship, citation or career progression (Ahmed, 2012; Popal-Akhzarati, 2020).

The dichotomy between "they have knowledge, we have experiences" (Kilomba, 2010, p. 28) highlights the epistemic violence embedded in academia. These are not merely semantic distinctions; they carry power that upholds hierarchies and sustains male and white supremacy by defining whose knowledge is legitimate and whose is not. The structures of academic knowledge validation remain controlled mainly by white scholars – both male and to a lesser extent female – who frame their perspectives as universal standards, thus determining what is accepted as "true" and "valid" scholarship (Kilomba, 2010, p. 29). Scholars have shown that universities continue to reproduce colonial knowledge hierarchies, where non-Western epistemologies and racialized subjects are either devalued or appropriated under the guise of universalism (Connell, 2014).

Research shows similar practices about mentoring: Harris and Ogbonna (2023) studied the perception of gender equality mentoring programs by ethnic minorities in UK universities. The study indicates that BiPoC academics often expressed dissatisfaction with mentoring, attributing this to both the unfavorable institutional context and perceived lack of authenticity in interactions with white mentors. It raises the question: Who is represented as what in mentoring programs? As Harris and Ogbonna (2023, p. 941) show, BiPoC scholars perceived mentoring "as a crude attempt at control, overly target-focussed, with closed scared mentors over-keen on creating clones of themselves in ways that exclude BME academics" by female BiPoC scholars.

3.2 The disciplinary dispositif: marketized visibility in the discourse of neoliberal excellence

Since the 1990s, discourses and visibilities within academia have undergone significant changes, particularly with the rise of excellence discourses (Ball, 2000). Rankings and ratings have significantly altered the academic landscape by influencing the understanding of knowledge, fostering competition between universities and scholars, and shaping international discussions on excellence and institutional reputation. By making research outputs, publications and metrics publicly visible, this "regime of visibility" ranks academics and situates them within hierarchical structures, effectively "putting people in their place." In Foucauldian terms, such visibility functions as a disciplinary mechanism: it shapes behavior, organizes competition, and enforces norms by making performance measurable and comparable. Digital tracking, bibliometric evaluation and surveillance of publications within the neoliberal university exemplify how these mechanisms regulate not only what knowledge is produced but also how academic producers conduct themselves, instilling self-discipline and conformity to institutional expectations (Angermuller, 2010).

In the context of excellence discourses and the entrepreneurial university, gender and diversity have been reframed as resources, thereby creating new forms of visibility (McRobbie, 2008). Particularly, women and BiPoC scholars are becoming more visible in this context (Ahmed, 2012). However, thinking this through the disciplinary *dispositif*, this visibility is not emancipatory but operates as a mechanism of control. Visibility is not simply "granted"; it is contingent on conforming to the discursive construction of the excellence paradigm. Diversity itself becomes instrumentalized – as a branding resource for institutions, seeking legitimacy in global academic markets (Ahmed, 2012). This results in an ambivalent politics of visibility; it may be granted, but often only in pre-defined, depoliticized forms (Wieners and Weber, 2020). Inequalities becomes "unspeakable" because they can only be

negotiated within the constraints of the dominant discourse (Wieners and Weber, 2020). Thus, the disciplinary *dispositif* produces not genuine diversity but a controlled, depoliticized visibility, which is permitted, but only on the condition that it does not challenge the system.

Studies on mentoring for female academics and BiPoC scholars show similar results. They have criticized the implicit male biographical pattern underlying mentoring programs. They position the mentee as an isolated subject in need of guidance – a construction that aligns with broader neoliberal narratives of individual achievement and self-optimization (Sandager, 2021; Dashper, 2019). As studies indicate, this perspective fosters a normalizing notion of careers, thereby excluding and marginalizing "deviant" subject positions (Wieners, 2022). This becomes particularly evident when looking at studies that show how women and racialized minorities in formal mentoring programs tend to receive more psychosocial than career-oriented support (Ragins and Cotton, 1999; Ensher and Murphy, 1997; Sosik and Godshalk, 2000). While psychosocial support may be personally affirming, it contributes less to institutional advancement, reinforcing an individualized and gendered logic of support rather than addressing structural inequality and privileges.

3.3 Dispositif of normalization: white, raced and male

Akbaba and Wagner (2022), in an ethnographic study in German higher education institutions, show how whiteness is a dominant institutional marker. This is in line with scholarship on higher education institutions in the global north as well as feminist and postcolonial standpoint theory: Academic subjects and, hence, the knowledge they produce, withhold a primarily white, raced and male standpoint (Harding, 1991, 2008). This leads to a situation in which only certain – typically white, male, Western – perspectives are recognized as rational, "neutral", and central within scientific discourse (Acker, 2006).

When whiteness is the (unspoken) norm, research shows that perspectives of BiPoC are structurally excluded within academic institutions, which continue to fall short of functioning as racism-critical learning environments. As Çağlar and Akue-Dovi (2025) emphasize, the knowledge-bearing perspectives of BiPoC students are frequently marginalized or rendered invisible. This exclusion is not only material but epistemic. The university has long been a site where female and BiPoC scholars' voices have been silenced, while white scholars have developed theoretical frameworks that formally constructed Blackness as inferior. Black scholars who work on racism often face the delegitimization of their research, being told that their work is not truly scientific – a move that effectively silences their voices and reinforces dominant epistemologies (Harding, 1991). As Hall notes, "within these rooms we were made the objects of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses, but we have rarely been the subjects" (Hall, 1992 as cited in Kilomba, 2028, p. 27).

Again, studies show that a normalizing *dispositif* underlies mentoring programs. Schlüter and Berkels (2014) illustrate this by identifying three learning dimensions in mentoring programs for women. In an interview study, they reconstruct three modes of learning: (1) operational-adaptive learning (mastery of informal norms and networks), (2) strategic-exploratory learning (skills for leadership and work-life balance) and (3) normative-identity learning (strengthening self-efficacy and professional identity). What they reveal is that mentees learn to navigate in predominantly male academic institutions, while institutional inequalities are either overlooked or individualized. Existing studies on and of BiPoC scholars on mentoring programs highlight this as well (Bhopal, 2020).

3.4 Subjectivation in normalizing and disciplinarizing dispositifs: individualized responsibility

How do these *dispositifs* subjectivate academics? That is, how do they shape the formation of an intelligible academic subject or fail to impede it? Fereidooni (2020) and Malik (2023) describe the ambivalent positioning of BiPoC scholars as one of continuous overexposure and epistemic marginalization. Scholars are often compelled to speak not only for themselves but

also as proxies for collective identities (Popal-Akhzarati, 2020). Rather than acknowledging structural barriers, these dimensions are often individualized and psychologized (Wolffram, 2022; Acker and Wagner, 2019). Marginalized scholars are thus held accountable not only for navigating a system not designed for them but also for solving the very inequalities they are subjected to. BiPoCs "are not only expected to stand or study for themselves but are also always expected to be representative of their "own group" (Popal-Akhzarati, 2020, p. 83, own translation). Bacevic (2023, p. 1128) names domaining as another example – i.e. "limiting a person's epistemic claim to a particular domain of knowledge." This can be regarded as a form of boundary-keeping and makes it "more difficult for certain knowers to be recognized within the discipline, and thus easier to confine them to a single domain, subdiscipline, or field – what one academic described as 'stay in your lane'" (Bacevic, 2023, p. 1129).

To sum up, examining academia through the three *dispositifs* shows that the gaze orders of these *dispositifs* constitute visibilities and speakabilities, organizing privileges and opportunities for white and male scholars while disadvantaging particularly BiPoC scholars. The next section introduces a fourth dispositive, the dispositif of imagination and proposes a conceptual approach to transform gaze orders.

4. Re-thinking mentoring as de-privileging institutional practices

Feminist and organizational (education) research criticizes that structural and institutional barriers for female academics often remain unchallenged, while mentoring is increasingly deployed as a technology to integrate "diverse" subjects into unchanged institutional structures. Vries (2012) therefore argues that mentoring must extend beyond individual empowerment to confront institutional inequalities within higher education institutions. While we agree that transforming higher education requires engaging with organizational conditions, we argue that an epistemic perspective is necessary. Mentoring programs in academia do not exist outside of epistemic orders; instead, they are embedded in and shaped by prevailing discourses. From this perspective, mentoring is not a neutral tool for individual advancement but a discursive site where specific gaze orders construct and stabilize particular subject positions. *Dispositifs* determine not only what mentoring is, but also who is seen as worthy of support, in need of development or as professionally competent. Mentoring programs are thus not external to power but entangled in power/knowledge formations that regulate visibility and recognition in academic contexts, ultimately reproducing privilege.

Yet, some research also conceptualizes mentoring as learning communities (Ragins and Kram, 2007), proposes mentoring programs as instruments for organizational change, and highlight approaches to institutional transformation in academia (Vries and van den Brink, 2016). Building on this work, we suggest understanding mentoring programs as interventions into institutionalized gaze orders. To do so, we draw on a fourth *dispositif* introduced by Balke (2011) and inspired by Foucault: the *dispositif* of imagination. While the *dispositif* of representation, discipline and normalization focus on controlling subjects, the *dispositif* of imagination opens up dreaming, imagining and designing alternatives (Abedi Farizani *et al.*, 2021). We will first introduce the *dispositif* of imagination and then introduce a design perspective to re-think mentoring programs.

4.1 The dispositif of imagination through intersectional feminist perspectives

In the second half of the 19th century, Foucault observed a new discursive constellation emerging that significantly reshaped the visual field. Technicians, amateurs, artists and illusionists began to circulate hybrid visual forms: images, photographs, pseudopictures and other visual constructs. These circulating forms defied traditional aesthetic and epistemic boundaries: the image acquired a transactional function, becoming not merely a representation, but an active participant in the production of meaning and affect, such as in early photographic practices, collages or in dreams. Foucault saw a unique potential in the

visual and imaginal: a capacity for dreaming, imagining and designing that follows its own logic – one that does not fully translate into spoken language. For him, the image holds a transcendent power (Abedi *et al*., 2021). With Balke, this can be seen as a new way of organizing knowledge and, therefore, as a new *dispositif*, the dispositif of imagination.

The *dispositif* of imagination also becomes relevant from an intersectional feminist perspective, as it seeks to reclaim imagination as a political tool. Feminist and critical race theorists such as Mulvey (1975), hooks (1992) or Campt (2017) have shown how dominant imaginaries often exclude or marginalize the experiences and epistemologies of women, especially those marked by coloniality, race and migration – but also how images and imagining can have a transformative power as they change power relation through practices of "looking and looking back" (hooks, 1992, p. 131). It involves both making the exclusions inherent in dominant epistemic orders visible as well as creating space for subversive, embodied and relational imaginaries that resist epistemic constraints. Imagination, in this sense, becomes both a critical and generative practice – capable of disrupting existing power/knowledge and envisioning more just, inclusive futures (Wieners and Weber, 2020; Abedi Farizani *et al*., 2021).

4.2 Intervening in academic gaze orders through the dispositif of imagination

In the following, we will tie together our argumentation and propose how an intervention into gaze orders can be conceptualized through the *dispositif* of imagination. In our understanding of interventions, these do not necessarily have to result in sudden change and transformation, but they can irritate the system and open up imagination. Our suggested approach is grounded in epistemic reflexivity and the re-imagination of mentoring programs. By epistemic reflexivity, we mean that mentoring programs should critically interrogate the knowledge formations that marginalize their participant. Rather than individualizing difference and focusing on adaptive learning to the organization's institutional pattern, mentoring should intervene in gaze orders and redistribute visibility and power. This requires mentoring programs to ask:

(1) Representation: Whose bodies, identities and biographies are symbolically centered or marginalized?

(2) Discipline: How do institutional practices surveil, normalize or marginalize and correct deviant subject position then?

(3) Normalization: Which narratives of "fit," "excellence" or "potential" prevail, and whom do they exclude?

(4) Imagination: What alternative futures, knowledges and institutional practices are rendered (im)possible?

In the following, we present and understand mentoring programs as interventions and discuss how they can challenge gaze orders and help to re-think mentoring programs and overcome privileges in academia.

4.3 Interventions in gaze orders: how innovation labs can reconceptualize mentoring programs

Mentoring is most defined as a one-on-one relationship between a mentee and a mentor with the goal to advance the mentee's career. However, as mentoring has been formalized into mentoring programs, they are typically integrated within equal opportunity offices and are integral to the organizations' broader equality and diversity strategies (Spintig and Tajmel, 2017). While literature reveals adaptive learning processes and criticizes that institutional gaze orders are hardly challenged, mentoring programs are still considered as learning communities and some literature also shows that women experience and learn new ways of being (Cobb-

Roberts and Esnard, 2023). Furthermore, mentoring programs have diverse stakeholders – mentees, mentors, program coordinators and steering committees. As they are embedded in higher education institutions, we argue that they serve as a point of entrance to possibly transform gaze orders and redistribute privileges if we understand mentoring programs as innovation labs (Weber, 2018).

Future and innovation labs represent a transformative approach to addressing complex institutional challenges by fostering collaborative and participatory environments. These labs function as dynamic spaces where diverse stakeholders can come together to engage in dialogical processes. From an epistemic perspective inspired by Foucault (1972), innovation labs operate under the guiding question, *"Who is speaking?"* At their core lies a critique of power/knowledge relations, as outlined in Sections 2 and 3. This critique not only interrogates existing orders but actively seeks to disrupt them. Foucault (2024, p. 23) describes critique as the refusal "to be governed like that." The goal, then, is to expand the boundaries of what can be said and seen, and to decenter dominant speaking positions (Weber, 2013).

Innovation labs embody a reflective and imaginative mode of collective practice (Weber and Heidelmann, 2023). As Adler and Weber (2019) suggest, these labs can be understood as *heterotopic* sites – spaces that both reflect and challenge the dominant order. As Bulgrin and Daniels (2025) emphasize, innovation labs foster new ways of learning and knowing by embracing multiple, coexisting epistemologies. They serve as zones of transformation (Idrus, 2015; Adler and Weber, 2019), cultivating the potential for socio-ecological change. Through these processes, participants can empowered to challenge and reshape prevailing regimes of visibility and knowledge (Abedi Farizani *et al.*, 2021). By bringing "the entire system into one space" (Weber, 2013), innovation labs allow for the confrontation of discriminatory structures and the exploration of situated perspectives from all participants. This methodology encourages collective reflection and experimentation while supporting the co-imagination of alternative academic futures.

4.4 Innovation labs as spaces for intersectional feminist re-imagination of mentoring

Drawing on intersectional feminist debates, we propose the establishment of mentoring programs as experimental, reflexive and power-conscious innovation labs to challenge epistemic orders and the injustice they produce. These labs aim to challenge existing hierarchies, privileges and dominant epistemologies by cultivating alternative, more equitable forms of empowerment, relationality and institutional recognition (Abedi Farizani *et al.*, 2021).

A central dimension of this approach is a dual focus on power as recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 1998): On the one hand, engaging stakeholders who, by their institutional positioning, have the potential to exert influence; on the other hand, seeking to redistribute epistemic power – that is, to make marginalized knowledge systems and experiential standpoints visible, valued and actionable. How can we organize innovation labs? As mentioned earlier, innovation labs encompass diverse stakeholders and their respective perspectives. However, within this space, power is not distributed equally and actors hold differing epistemic speaking positions – ranging from hypervisibility to epistemic invisibility. How can we acknowledge this and disrupt existing orders of visibility and knowledge production?

To address these asymmetries, we draw on Spivak (2015) postcolonial ethics of care, in which she outlines the necessity of attentiveness to power relations. Her approach calls for dialogic ethics grounded in shared values such as attentiveness, responsibility and relationality. Particularly central is the concept of effective listening (Robinson, 2011), which involves not only hearing but truly attending to the concerns, needs and aims of others – especially those structurally marginalized. Spivak (2015) further emphasizes the importance of humility as a precondition for ethical engagement. This entails acknowledging one's implication in power structures and cultivating a posture of learning, rather than assuming mastery or authority. In the context of innovation labs, this means creating spaces that not only

redistribute access but also facilitate institutional care and epistemic transformation – namely, a fundamental reconfiguration of subjectivity and subject positions that enables new orders of being and knowing in the social world.

Additionally, we borrow from Bhabha's (1994) concept of the Third Space, which foregrounds hybridity as a condition for critical engagement. This space resists fixed, dominant narratives and opens up possibilities for new forms of meaning-making and social transformation (Farizani and Wieners, 2022). It invites a humble orientation – one that does not seek to resolve complexity or difference, but to dwell in it productively. In this way, innovation labs become not only inclusive by design but also disruptive of normative assumptions about knowledge, identity and legitimacy.

This includes the deliberate creation of safer spaces for structurally marginalized scholars – particularly BiPoC women scholars – to foster collective self-understanding, empowerment and community-building. Such spaces serve as critical platforms for cultivating agency and strategic capacity to intervene in predominantly white academic contexts. For white participants, this entails adopting a humble position, which involves actively interrogating their racialized and institutional privilege, relinquishing the drive to "teach" or "lead" the conversation and instead committing to practices of unlearning, solidarity, and accountability (Robinson, 2011). Humility here is not a passive stance, but an active ethical and political position grounded in the recognition of difference, power and shared struggle.

4.5 Implications for key stakeholders

Mentoring programs involve diverse stakeholders across multiple institutional levels, each situated within different positionalities of power and knowledge. Innovation labs, when guided by postcolonial and intersectional frameworks, offer an opportunity to re-imagine these roles.

4.6 (BiPoC) mentees: creating safer and empowering epistemic spaces

For mentees, innovation labs framed through an intersectional feminist lens enable the recognition of situated knowledges not only as valid but as central to collective learning and structural critique. Rather than being expected to assimilate into dominant norms of academic excellence, mentees are empowered to articulate and assert diverse epistemic positions. This includes cultivating self-reflexivity, building solidarities and fostering what hooks (1992, p. 115) calls the "oppositional gaze" – a resistant way of seeing that challenges dominant narratives and reclaims agency. For Hooks (1992, p. 122), the oppositional is not only a form of remembrance of one's own history but also an act of resistance against silence and invisibility. In this sense, mentoring programs give the opportunity to become visible on one's own terms and the possibility to experience and experiment with new gaze orders of care (Wieners, n.d.).

4.7 Mentors: practicing dialogical and reflexive mentorship

In innovation labs, mentors are not positioned as the main knowledge-bearing figure, but as co-learners engaged in a process of mutual transformation. They are invited to critically reflect on their own social positions – across race, gender, class – and to reconsider mentoring as a dialogic, rather than hierarchical, practice. Drawing on Spivak's ethics of care and Bhabha's notion of hybridity, mentoring becomes a space for negotiating power, practicing vulnerability and embracing complexity (Robinson, 2011). This shift requires a conscious effort to unlearn traditional academic norms, re-think privileges and engage in ongoing accountability and reflection.

4.8 Program coordinators: institutionalizing reflexive and inclusive infrastructures

Program coordinators play a crucial role in shaping the structural conditions under which mentoring occurs. Understanding mentoring programs as innovation labs enables coordinators

to move beyond conventional dyadic models and develop formats that are inclusive, dialogic and grounded in critical pedagogies. This involves integrating feedback from marginalized communities, embedding intersectional frameworks into training and institutionalizing mechanisms for transparency and transformation. Crucially, their work must be grounded in an awareness of how institutional power operates.

4.9 University leadership: aligning mentoring with equity-oriented change

At the institutional level, innovation labs offer a means for translating critical knowledge into actionable strategies. University leadership is thus called upon not merely to support mentoring in symbolic terms but to embed it in broader agendas of equity, inclusion and epistemic justice. This includes the allocation of resources, but also a commitment to structural and institutional transformation – such as revising evaluation metrics, addressing systemic racism and legitimizing diverse forms of scholarly excellence, as for example proposed by Wegrzyn and Altenstädter (2024). Leadership, too, must adopt a posture of humility: recognizing that change begins with listening and accountability (Robinson, 2011).

4.10 White mentors/program coordinators/university leadership: educating oneself and taking up responsibility

Critical whiteness studies and research on the experiences of BiPoC scholars highlight that BiPoC scholars are often expected to explain structural and institutional discrimination to white colleagues, a burden that can negatively impact well-being (DeCuir-Gunby and Gunby, 2016). To counteract this dynamic, it is essential for white mentors, program coordinators and university leaders to engage in self-education and reflection, not only during the program but before it begins. This involves examining one's own positionality, privileges and entanglements within systems of racial inequality. Heckler (2022) describes this as "self-work". Effective preparation includes learning to challenge the assumption that "white is the default mode" (Cole and Grace, 2021, p. 87), understanding how white people benefit from systemic racism and recognizing anti-racism as an ongoing process of unlearning and continuous action rather than a fixed achievement (Morales, 2022).

5. Outlook

The underrepresentation of female BiPoC scholars in academia remains a well-documented and enduring phenomenon. Drawing on Foucault, we have argued not solely from the perspective of institutional structures, but from an epistemic angle, attending to the power/knowledge formations that constitute subject positions and visibility within the academy. These knowledge formations produce marginality not only through material exclusion but also through epistemic orders of recognition, that is, who is acknowledged as a scholar and who is not.

In this context, interventions into gaze orders become crucial. As we have shown, intersectional feminist and epistemological perspectives provide conceptual resources for disrupting hegemonic male and white imaginaries. Mentoring programs, when informed by such approaches, offer potential entry points for multi-level interventions. Mentors, mentees, program coordinators and university leadership can be mobilized as change agents, not only supporting individual trajectories but engaging in the collective labor of re-imagining the institution itself.

These approaches challenge academic institutions to critically reflect on their orders of seeing and the epistemic orders that structure inclusion, recognition and legitimacy. However, as Bielefeld (1991) cautions, anti-racist discourse can risk reifying the very categories it seeks to dismantle. In this sense, the goal is to render visible the centering of whiteness and masculinity without reinscribing their dominance, centering marginalized subjectivities without essentializing them. Reframing mentoring programs through this lens enables a shift

beyond the paradigm of individualized support toward a vision of organizational becoming. Mentoring becomes a contested site of epistemic and symbolic struggle where knowledge is not simply transmitted but renegotiated; where institutional norms are not merely followed but actively unsettled and transformed. By challenging epistemic and symbolic orders, mentoring creates spaces for institutions to confront themselves – thus learning not only to reflect, but to re-imagine toward a culture of equality and care.

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Notes

1. Due to German history and the persecution of Jews during National Socialism, the term "race" is not commonly used in German and is controversial (Bergold-Caldwell and Maurer, 2023). Official statistics use the proxy "migration background," which refers to all individuals who themselves or whose parents were not born in Germany. Discrimination-critical works point out that individuals without an official migration background are also referred to as migrants in Germany. When citing official statistics in this publication, we will use the term "migration background." However, in our contribution, we refer to all individuals who are racialized and marginalized by ethno-institutional discourses.
2. Epistemic violence refers to how dominant knowledge systems marginalize, silence, or delegitimize alternative perspectives and epistemologies by suppressing and devaluing them (Spivak, 1988).

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