

# ***NAVIGATING THE GENDERED LABYRINTHS AND MANAGING THE MEAN GIRLS AND QUEEN BEES WITHIN THE ACADEMY A Dialogue Between Two Women Assistant Professors***

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Using labyrinth as a metaphor suggests that a woman's path within an organization is paved with biases, discrimination, and other obstacles. In this article, we describe our experiences as women on the path from graduate school through positions as advanced assistant professors, and in particular, our interactions with women colleagues along the way. Utilizing duoethnography, we engaged in dialogic conversations to generate our data. We characterize the findings, or our interactions with some women colleagues in the academy, as gas-lighting, bait and switch, smoke and mirrors, and oh the irony.

**Keywords:** mean girls, queen bees, women, leadership, assistant professor, duoethnography

## ***INTRODUCTION***

There is a special place in hell for women  
who don't help each other!

—Madeleine Albright

Leadership behaviors often attributed to women are “interdependence, cooperation, receptivity, acceptance, and awareness of patterns, gestalt, and context” (Irby et al., 2013, p.

985). Women are often characterized as nurturing, kind, and supportive and are frequently viewed as great mentors and role models (Sandberg & Grant, 2016). Given these characteristics and as a historically oppressed group, it may seem logical that women would support each other in their pursuits, particularly in spaces known to be exclusionary (e.g., institutions of higher education [HE]). However, in HE environments, ripe with hierar-

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*The SoJo Journal: Educational Foundations and Social Justice Education*, Vol. 6(1/2), 2020, pp. 41–55 ISSN 2381-5183  
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chiefs and histories of exclusion and marginalization (Maranto & Griffin, 2011), the “mean girl” academic has been cited as oppositional to the behaviors and characteristics previously listed (Dentith et al. 2015). Academic bullying and incivility coming from senior women academics (e.g., queen bees) toward junior women academics can be confusing, hurtful, and detrimental to a junior academic’s career trajectory leaving them without necessary mentorship, guidance, and support. queen bees and/or mean girl academics can be seen as the personification of gendered oppression, reinforcing the elitist, patriarchal, norms of HE and reestablishing the exclusionary roots and values of such institutions.

Using labyrinth as a metaphor (Eagly & Carli, 2007), which suggests that a woman’s path within an organization is paved with biases, discrimination, and other challenges, we discuss our experiences from graduate school through positions as advanced assistant professors in higher education, and in particular, our interactions with women colleagues along the way. That is, we center our own voices and our own experiences confronting mean girls and queen bees in the academy.

### **CHALLENGE ONE: INCIVILITY AND MEAN GIRLS**

Incivility in the workplace was first identified as a new construct in the 1990s (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Workplace incivility is defined as behavior that violates workplace standards for mutual respect, is rude and discourteous, and displays a lack of regard for others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Examples of incivility include being ignored or interrupted, being made fun of or mocked, and/or being treated with disinterest or disrespect (Gabriel et al., 2018). Andersson and Pearson (1999) discerned that when uncivil behavior in the workplace is not addressed, then incivility becomes an organizational norm and permeates all aspects of the organization. Incivility in

the workplace has negative outcomes including decreased satisfaction (Pearson et al., 2001), increased feelings of burnout and stress (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004), increased absenteeism and increased turnover rates (Cortina et al., 2001).

Women employees tend to experience more instances of incivility in the workplace and are more likely to be victims of rude and discourteous behaviors than their male counterparts (Loi et al., 2015). Trudel and Reio (2011) found that incivility between women employees and women supervisors is a prevailing and growing problem for organizations, and Shepherd and Aquino (2017) argue that women experience incivility from other women because they often compete for limited resources and access in the organization. Scholarship has found a positive association between workplace incivility and retention of women employees (Lim et al., 2008). That is, women are more likely to quit jobs where they encounter incivility (Loi et al., 2015).

An uncivil woman is often referred to as a *mean girl* in popular culture. The persona of the mean girl developed in the early 2000s in popular books, such as *Queen Bees & Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2002) and *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) as well as in films such as *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004). The mean girl persona is based on the premise that popular girls will protect and cultivate their power, status, and social position through cruel and insidious tactics (Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). Mean girls use relational aggression or social manipulation to undermine or victimize other girls (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Some of the aggressive tactics that mean girls employ are social undermining, indifference, ostracism, and gossip (Sheppard & Aquino, 2017). Although the term mean girl is primarily used to describe adolescent girl behavior, it is also used to describe adult women in the workplace. Dellasega (2005) explains that “women who get stuck in these [mean girl] roles are still involved in the same harmful dynamic years later in the workplace” (p. 2).

### ***Women's Working Relationships With Other Women***

The 20th century saw a significant increase of women entering the workplace (Duguid, 2011). As women entered historically male dominated industries, they encountered gender inequalities such as unequal pay, sexual harassment, and limited promotions. Some feminists have challenged gender inequality through efforts to ensure the expansion of equal rights under the law regardless of race, religion, gender identification, or sexual orientation. Further, many feminists emphasize trust, empathy, and relationships (Young & Marshall, 2013) and believe that “gender divisions of work, pleasure, power, and sensibility are socially created, detrimental to women, and should be changed” (Ruddick, 1989, p. 235). Feminists often enact social change in their efforts to overturn patriarchal, dominating views (Young & Marshall, 2013) which minimize women’s abilities and limits their roles to stereotypical careers such as nurses, teachers, and homemakers (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). Much of the progress women have witnessed in HE has been the result of feminists fighting for social and organizational change (Rhoads, 2016).

Although many feminists argue for equality for all, women who prefer to be distinctive in their workplaces may be biased against other women, and may perpetuate gender inequality (Duguid, 2011). Moreover, some women who claim to be feminists continue to oppress women and other members of systemically marginalized groups (Cooper, 2016). Derks et al. (2016) argue that there is a false belief that “gender inequality is perpetuated by men but not by women, that senior women will mentor and promote other women and that women will add a feminine perspective to leadership and serve as inspirational role models for their junior counterparts” (p. 456). However, in reality, women often perceive other women as a competitive threat and may disregard or undermine them (Sheppard & Aquino, 2017). Moreover, as women enter male-dominated

workplaces, they tend to “assimilate to the male-dominated organization and adjust their self-presentation and leadership style to fit the masculine organization culture” (Derks et al., 2016, p. 456). As a result, and as women assume power or leadership positions, they sometimes become queen bees; consequently, one of the main barriers to women supporting other women is the queen bee syndrome (Webber & Giuffre, 2019).

### ***CHALLENGE TWO: QUEEN BEES***

Queen bee syndrome is a pattern of traits and characteristics used to describe the behavior of some women leaders in the workplace and their aggressive or competitive nature toward other women (Staines et al., 1974). Queen bee syndrome originated in the academic literature from the 1970s after the growth of the number of women in the workplace who rejected the feminist movement and did not assist other women in their career progression (Mavin, 2008). The term *queen bee* has been used to describe women who have reached high ranks in male-dominated organizations and “intentionally hinder the career progress of females in lower levels of the job ladder” (Bednar & Gicheva, 2014, p. 370). Women described as queen bees tend to be depicted as conniving, unsupportive, and backstabbing (Sheppard & Aquino, 2017). Derks (2017) identified three categories of queen bee behavior:

1. Becoming more like men ... by emphasizing masculine characteristics (e.g., assertiveness, taking risks, competitiveness) and an agentic leadership style (e.g., charismatic, dominant).
2. Emphasizing how they are different from other women ... [by] stress[ing] that compared to other women they are much more agentic, ambitious, and willing to make sacrifices for their careers.
3. Endorsing and legitimizing the current gender hierarchy ... by being very critical of junior women (more so than senior

men); ... by explicitly endorsing stereotypes of women as being less ambitious and less committed than men (while stressing that they are not like other women); ... endors[ing] a meritocratic ideology while denying that gender discrimination is still an issue; ... oppos[ing] affirmative action policies designed to improve opportunities for junior women; ... be[ing] less willing to act as mentors for their female subordinates (p. 2).

The depiction of women as queen bees in the workplace is often viewed as a result of gender inequality. Sandburg and Grant (2016) argue that

Queen bees aren't a reason for inequality but rather a result of inequality. In male-dominated settings, token women are more likely to worry about their standing, so they're reluctant to advocate for other women. Fearing that their group isn't valued, some members distance themselves from their own kind. (n.p.)

Queen bee syndrome is problematic for junior faculty as they enter the professoriate because it serves as a barrier to effective socialization.

### ***CHALLENGE THREE: SOCIALIZATION INTO THE PROFESSORIATE***

Socialization of new faculty into HE institutions has been identified as a necessary means to instill the values and norms of the profession and institution (Tierney & Rhodes, 1994). Socialization is defined as the process that allows an individual to acquire the necessary skills and information in order to actively participate in a new organization (Tierney & Rhodes, 1994). Each HE institution has its own culture, norms, and expectations in terms of tenure and promotion (Hackmann & McCarthy, 2011), and junior faculty need context-specific socialization into the professoriate so

they can understand what is expected of them with regard to teaching, research, and service. The process of socialization in HE institutions is dependent on the relationships formed between junior and veteran faculty and the willingness of veteran faculty to support new faculty with navigating institutional norms (Cawyer et al., 2002). Unfortunately, many universities do not make a concerted effort to socialize new faculty (Cawyer et al., 2002); and consequently, junior faculty often feel lonely and isolated during the pretenure years.

Mentoring is commonly accepted as a critical strategy for helping women socialize into a profession and advance their careers (Hill & Wheat, 2017). Hill and Wheat (2017) note that mentoring is important for women at all levels of the academy in providing them with role models, advice/guidance/support, and strategies for overcoming gendered barriers. Mentoring provides numerous benefits for women including a strong sense of professional identity, career advancement, job satisfaction, and a sense of community (Johnson & Ridley, 2015); however, the low percentages of women among faculty limit mentoring opportunities for women beginning their careers in HE (Brown, 2005). Currently, women earn the majority of doctoral degrees, but they are underrepresented among faculty and face persistent negative climates (Snyder et al., 2016). Additionally, women junior faculty are impacted by the lack of socialization into the professoriate due to the lack of senior women faculty willing to mentor and promote them. The need for junior faculty to navigate academia on their own, including finding their own mentors or creating their own social networks (McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015), may be exacerbated by gender norms that both pressure women to exhibit traditional (i.e., male) behavioral traits (Lester, 2011) and display a greater commitment to both family and work, when compared to men (Gibson, 2006). Such feelings can lead to women faculty second-guessing their decision to enter academia (Cress & Hart, 2009).

## **METHODS**

In this article, we discuss our experiences as graduate students and junior faculty in HE, specifically in school leadership programs, and our interactions with other women colleagues. In this section we discuss our positionalities, our unique research design, as well as our data collection methods and analyses.

### ***Positionalities and Participants***

We come to this study with similar backgrounds, in particular our socioeconomic status, rurality, and age. That is, we grew up in the 70s and 80s, in working class, rural families with financial struggles, and single mothers who seemed to work constantly. We brought these similar experiences with us to the academy where we also confronted many similar challenges in terms of socialization and interactions with other women colleagues.

Leslie Ann Locke (LL) identifies as a White, cisgender, straight, first-generation woman from a low-income, rural background (Locke, 2017a, 2017b). Sonya Hayes (SH) identifies as a White, cisgender, straight, first-generation woman from a low-income, rural background.

### ***Research Design***

We used a qualitative duoethnographic research design to respond to the research question: What are our experiences as women junior faculty members in educational leadership programs with senior women colleagues? Duoethnography, developed by Sawyer and Norris (2004), involves coconstructing a narrative through intersecting autoethnographies (Ellis, 2004). In duoethnography, two researchers engage in dialogue, centered on their personal experiences, their separate backgrounds in relation to each other (Zazkis & Koichu, 2015), and their experiences situated within a common phenomenon (Sawyer & Norris, 2004). Consequently, the authors are both the researchers and participants in the

study (Norris, 2008). As such, duoethnography examines how different individuals give both similar and different meanings to a shared phenomenon and interpret the phenomenon based on their shared experiences (Sawyer & Norris, 2004). Furthermore, duoethnography is a research method that seeks to explore “narratives of superiority and oppression” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 7), through which people internalize structures of injustice (Spry, 2001).

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Using duoethnographic methodology (Sawyer & Norris, 2004), we generated our data through semistructured, critical, ethnographic dialogic conversations (Madison, 2006). We engaged in four separate critical dialogues (via Zoom) about our experiences in the academy and our interactions with other women in our programs and institutions. Each dialogue ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. We began each dialogue with a rough, semistructured protocol regarding the focus of the conversation. While our protocols and associated dialogues were centered on graduate school, interactions with advisors, first and second academic appointments, and interactions with women colleagues, respectfully, we discussed these topics to varying degrees across all four of our meetings. As coresearchers, we embraced dialogic conversation within duoethnography because “we are not simply subjects, but we are subjects in a dialogue with others” (Madison, 2006, p. 23). We audio-recorded the dialogues and transcribed them for analyses.

We coded the data in three rounds. In our initial coding, we reviewed the transcripts separately and developed a list of codes based on our individual analysis (Miles et al., 2014). After individual coding, we retained the similar codes and discussed and negotiated the items that we coded differently. We then created a master code list which included our mutually agreed upon codes. Next we coded the transcripts against these codes (Miles et al., 2014). After reviewing the coded data, we discussed similar patterns across the codes and

developed themes. We titled these themes: *Gaslighting*, *Smoke and Mirrors*, *Bait and Switch*, and *Oh the Irony*. Within each of these themes, various subthemes support the larger idea identified in the theme. These themes and subthemes describe our experiences in the academy and our interactions specifically with some women colleagues. Many of these experiences and interactions have been tainted broadly by incivility, a differential in power related to having tenure and not having it, and a lack of mentoring and support.

### **GASLIGHTING**

Gaslighting is defined as the manipulation of a person by “psychological means into questioning their own sanity” (Oxford, 2020a, n.p.), memory, or reality. This is usually done by deception (e.g., withholding of factual information). We experienced gaslighting in a variety of ways including receiving and trying to interpret mixed messages from women colleagues, feeling bullied and abused by women colleagues—particularly those with tenure, and questioning which persona we would interact with—a mean girl, a queen bee, or neither. SH recalled an experience of gaslighting from a woman colleague as an advanced assistant professor:

When I got my offer letter, it was different than what I was told at the interview in terms of what I would teach. So I called [department chair] and said, “Hey, this is what I was told” And she said, “Well, you know that shouldn’t have been told to you ... and this is what you’re going to teach.” In my mind I’m thinking, “But *you’re* the one that told me, so I don’t know why you’re saying that shouldn’t have been told to me when you’re the one who told me.”

LL continued, noting her experiences with gaslighting from a woman colleague,

There were multiple times where I caught [woman colleague] in a straight up lie to my face. For example, there was a prominent

position open in our [professional organization] and at this time I was an assistant professor and she was a full professor.... My mentor [from outside the university] contacted me and told me that I should run for the position. So I did. Then, when the ballots came out ... I discovered that [woman colleague] was also running! I could not believe it. We had not discussed this at all, even though we work closely. After the candidates were announced, she emailed me and said, “Oh my God, I wonder why they [the nominations committee] didn’t tell me you were running when they asked me to run!” I knew the chair of that committee and so I called her and asked her if [woman colleague] was invited to run for the position, and she flatly told me, “Ah, no, she self-nominated.” I could not figure it out. She was a full professor! Why in the hell was she running for this position? She did not need it and took the position from somebody who could use it to support tenure and promotion and to make connections in the field.

Clearly, within these experiences with gaslighting are the receipt of mixed messages and misinformation. As we discussed our experiences, we identified examples of when we were sent mixed messages as well as misinformation. That is, when ideas and advice from women colleagues were just plain wrong.

### **Mixed Messages and Misinformation**

Receiving mixed messages and misinformation was common among our experiences. Reflecting on our time in graduate school, just before we went on the job market, we both experienced mixed messages from prominent women in our departments regarding our preparedness for a faculty job. Along with the mixed messages are the facts that these women, in the end, were just plain wrong.

LL noted that one of her primary advisors was a frequent sender of mixed and false information.

[Advisor] really came after me and thought that organizing and participating in a writing

retreat harmed me rather than helped me. She said it "... really put you behind the eight ball." Really set me back. And that's the reason I ended up getting my first job, because I organized and participated in that retreat, not because of any sort of connection with her. Like, she thought that I would get jobs because she's "so well known in the field." That wasn't what got me a job. The people at [institution] had no idea who she was.

Similarly, SH recalled an experience with a woman scholar, and her instructor at the time, regarding her suitability for the professoriate:

I was in a class and [woman instructor] was going around and syrupy sweet talking to everybody. She's asking people "So what are you going to do after graduation?" She comes to me and she goes "And what about you Sonya? What are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I'm going to defend my proposal soon and then work on IRB and write my dissertation next year. While I'm writing I'm hoping to go on the job market. I want to be a professor." And she goes, "That will never happen. You will never get a job. You need to think about staying in the practitioner world. You'll never get a job. You don't have any publications. You don't have any research. You haven't worked on any grants." I mean, in front of the whole class, just berating me. I was almost in tears. But when I did go on the job market, I had many job interviews and offers!

### ***Bullying, Emotionally Abusive, and Punch Drunk on Tenure***

Closely connected to mixed messages and misinformation, were instances of bullying. We both had experience with women colleagues who we felt tried to "bully" us into doing things that we did not want to do. SH recalled an experience where she felt bullied, just as she was trying to figure out which offer to accept as her first academic job.

[Advisor] was bound and determined that I was going to go to an R1. She wanted that. I didn't know at the time, but that was a notch in her belt to have one of her PhD students to go to an R1. She was really pushing. So I inter-

viewed at [R1]. [The R1] was fine ... but I loved [R2]. I mean, the people were just absolutely freaking amazing. I mean, just wonderful people. Spent so much time with me and showed me all around. I just felt like I was part of the family. The day that I was leaving, the search committee chair says, "I just want you to know, I can't tell you officially, but I am putting your name forward as the candidate that we want." That's where I wanted to go. [Advisor] threw a conniption fit. She's like, "No, you're not going to a regional school. That's not good for you. It's not good for your career. You need to go to an R1. Blah, blah, blah." She goes, "I'm just looking out for you because you don't know. You just don't understand higher ed." Then she had her husband, Dr. [masked], call me and tell me the same thing, that I needed to go to an R1.

Ultimately, SH ended up accepting the position at the R1. However, she was unhappy and left after 1 year. The "mom and dad" bullying technique that SH experienced with the advisor and her husband was common to LL's experience in the academy:

I worked with a woman senior faculty member, who clearly did not like me or my research. She told me repeatedly that I should "adjust my research agenda" and once she even worked with our dean [a man], doing some backstage shady shit to undermine my position and influence his thinking about me and my work. Ultimately she was unsuccessful, but it was very hurtful and anxiety inducing. She's not at the university anymore, but I think of her actions as incredibly insincere ... she was always doing this feigning of concern and a sort of a "mom and dad" technique with her behind the scenes work with the dean. Ironically, she studied morality. Her behavior was so immoral!

As we discussed our experiences, we began to see many of them as emotionally abusive. It was abuse that was tolerated by the institution, and at the hands of women who we thought would support us. Further, many of the women we had direct interactions with seem to wholeheartedly embrace the power bestowed on them by the institution, that is, they seemed to be punch drunk on tenure. LL discussed her

experiences with emotional abuse as a graduate student:

[Being in graduate school] was unnecessarily difficult. Not the work ... anybody could do those classes. Anybody can take the classes and pass. It is this other shit that you have to deal with. That's what is going to break you. I feel like that's so stupid. Why not make the work difficult? Rather than this weird social, intangible side of things. I was at the whims of this mean girl [advisor]. I was there for her abusing pleasure and there was nothing I could do that felt legitimate. I can't go to the department head and say, "She's being an asshole," without having 10,000 repercussions or having to start my project over or some kind of nonsense. I just felt like... It's abuse of power. We're all adults. We were graduate students in these positions where they just really infantilize you, and it's tolerated ... there's just no recourse ... it's unfortunate that with tenure, and with protections that come with tenure, that people think that they can say and do whatever they want. Those protections are for something different, they're not for demeaning people, or making people feel isolated, or making people feel unwelcome or undeserving.

SH agreed, noting that instead of respecting others' humanity, "It's kind of like the abuse continues because that's the way it was when [they were] an assistant professor.... You just have to pay your dues, you just have to earn your knocks." SH went on to note that some of her senior women colleagues have used that power to get what they want. For example, she noted that one of her women colleagues was "riding that, 'I'm a full professor' card all year long." Any decision that would need to be made or decided by the department, she would say, "Well, I'm a full professor. I get more votes than you all do." Further, SH discussed similar power struggles she experienced as an assistant professor. One of her women colleagues said the following in front of students:

"Dr. Hayes doesn't know what she's talking about. Dr. Hayes is junior faculty, I'm full faculty. I know what I'm doing, she doesn't." It's

that kind of thing. So it's just this undermining, abusive behavior.

### ***Supportive Colleague, Mean Girl, or Queen Bee?***

Many of our women colleagues were supportive in some instances, and then very unsupportive in other instances—making them undependable and unpredictable, as well as disingenuous. Regarding some of her women colleagues, LL said,

depending on the day, they might be a queen bee and a mean girl ... or some sort of combo. They alternate.... But I feel like that's what you always have to brace yourself for ... which person is coming at me? You know certainly that it's never someone who is genuinely interested in my success and is going to help me.

Agreeing, SH said,

On some days I got wonderful [woman mentor] where she's very gracious and giving, and wants to help me with my writing and says "Let me read what you're doing and let me give you some advice. Let me tell you where we can send this ..." Then, there are days where I got the ballistic, irrational, crazy lady, who just wore me out ... if I agree with her and think that she's wonderful and fine, then she's this wonderful, lovely [woman mentor]. If I disagree with her or try to change something, then she gets upset and she comes out with claws and tears you down and rips you up and makes you feel like you don't matter.

### ***Smoke and Mirrors***

Smoke and mirrors is defined as "obscuring or embellishing the truth of a situation with misleading or irrelevant information" (Oxford Dictionary, 2020b, n.p.). We experienced "smoke and mirrors" or misleading and irrelevant information in the academy both as graduate students and as junior faculty. We frame our experiences here through a lack of meaningful support from women colleagues and the absence of individual or programmatic mentoring. Feeling that many of our women colleagues were disingenuous, undependable, and

unpredictable, yet still having to interact with them, we discussed some of the actions of our women colleagues as smoke and mirrors. LL discussed an experience with ‘smoke and mirrors’ when she was an advanced assistant professor.

So [woman colleague] writes me an email and says, “Why don’t you take over the program coordinatorship from [male colleague]? That will free him up to do other things.” This dude is a clinical person. I forwarded her email to the department chair and I said, “This seems like something that should come from you and not from [woman colleague] who has no leadership role in our program.” He agreed and told me to tell [woman colleague] that I talked to him and I don’t have to do it. So I did that. Then she writes back and says, “So [another program in our department] rotates the coordinator every 3 years,” as if I didn’t know that. She goes on, “When do you think you’ll be ready to take it over?” I was like, “What did I just say to you? I’m not going to take it over.” And so I wrote her back again and said, “Not ready. And I don’t know when I’m going to take it over.” Then her next message was, “Ok. I understand. No pressure.” And she backed off. I don’t think she actually cares about the program or me at all, but she wants other people to think that she cares. She does all of this theater, like smoke and mirrors. Like oh yes, let me take over a bunch of administrative work so that a man who makes several thousand dollars more than me and has no research responsibilities can have more freedom in his schedule. Um, no.

### ***No Support and No Mentoring***

Having work that was illogically assigned and little support to do it was a common experience for us in graduate school and as junior faculty. SH noted,

My first faculty job was just grad school, second course. It was the second helping of grad school, I was on my own. I had to be self-reliant and figure it all out by myself. I didn’t have any support ... there was nobody to ... I don’t want to say protect me, but there was

nobody to share anything, I was kind of dumped on. I came in and immediately I had to be the chair of all the masters. Then I had 18 doctoral students. Then I’m over the PhD program, and they’re wanting me to start an online EdD program. It was just like all of this was thrown on me, and there was really nobody there to say, “Ok, wait, time out. She’s [tenure-track] faculty, 60% of her job is research and you all have 60% of her job as service. We need to kind of like negotiate this.”

LL agreed noting,

It’s like you get there and they say “Oh thank God you’re here. We’re so happy you came. Here’s all this shit, bye.” Everybody’s been an assistant professor before that you’re talking to, so they know what it’s like not to know stuff or to need help and then they just pull the ladder up behind them like, “Ok, well, you’re in it. On with my life.”

SH agreed saying, “There’s just a lot that they expect you to know, and then if you don’t know, when you ask, it’s like there’s no support.”

A logical following to a lack of support, is an absence of mentoring. Both during our time in graduate school and as faculty, we discussed a noted absence of mentoring at the individual level and at the institutional level. When SH went to her first academic job at the R1, she found,

[R1] didn’t have anything, but at [other R1] they do have these mentoring meetings and mentoring networks, which are a joke. It shouldn’t even be called a mentoring network because there’s no mentoring going on. Anyway, I signed up, I wanted to be in an all-female group so that I could meet people across the university, maybe try to come up with some interdisciplinary stuff, and just meet people, because I don’t know anybody. I lived there 2 years and I can count on my hands how many people I know. At my first institution ... my mentor was actually a teaching and learning person [not even a person in the department or program]!

LL reflected,

I have never been in a place that is like, “Hey, grad student or junior faculty person, I know that you need to have certain articles in certain journals, you need to do certain things and I’m going to help you do that.” Never once, it’s always been me going, “Hey, senior person, I need to do XYZ to move forward, and I need help, will you help me?” It is often no, or at most, barely. It’s like the responsibility to mentor people is just absent. The people that are supposed to support you, for whatever reason, they’re doing just the opposite and making you feel insecure. Like I shouldn’t be doing this. I don’t have whatever it takes. Yet somehow they do?

### ***BAIT AND SWITCH***

Bait and switch, a term often associated with advertising, is defined as “a fraudulent or deceptive sales practice in which a purchaser is attracted by advertisement of a low-priced item but then is encouraged to purchase a higher-priced one” or commonly known as the “switcheroo” (Merriam-Webster, 2020, n.p). We describe some of our experiences as graduate students and as junior faculty members, and our interactions with some women colleagues in this way, however loosely. Specifically, we discuss “bait and switch” through the unethical behavior of our women colleagues and the incivility of some of our women colleagues. That is, our graduate programs and institutions (inclusive of the people in them) claim to be supportive places; however, in practice, they are not. SH described some classic examples of bait and switch or switcheroos with women colleagues.

Once at [conference], [woman colleague] was super nice to me for like 5 minutes and said, “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here. I’m going to go see my graduate student present. Come with me and help me support.” So I went with [her] and as soon as it was over, “Ok, well, thank you for being here,” and she just got up and left.... I was like, “Ok. I’m presenting

later. You going to come and watch me and ...?” Yeah. She didn’t, of course.

For another example, SH added:

I got this weird invitation to go lunch with [woman colleague].... So I was, “Oh, good. So she’s going to talk to me about what I’m doing. How she can help me or advise me on things to do.” But when we went to lunch, the entire conversation was about her and a book she wrote about breaking the man’s code and about being the first woman in the department and all the things she had dealt with in her 30, 40 years as a professor, as a female faculty member and just on and on. She’s talking the whole time and I don’t have an opportunity to ask about my own stuff. So I just listened. It’s all about, “Look at me and how wonderful I am and I paved the way for you to be an assistant professor today.” But nothing about directly impacting my career trajectory and helping me and supporting me. It’s like the people who have the power, and especially women who have the power, don’t want to [be supportive]. They talk the talk, but they don’t walk the walk.

LL agreed, noting that “universities seem to ... hire people and then just drop them into the deep end.”

### ***Unethical Behavior, Incivility, Little Jabs***

Another manifestation of bait and switch came through unethical behavior from some women colleagues. SH noted that a woman advisor in graduate school

would say, “Ok, well, we need to get some publications because I know you want to go into the professoriate. Send me some papers that you’ve done and I will help you coauthor these and get them published.” So I would spend hours getting all these papers cleaned up and sent to her and then nothing ever came of it. Never heard a word from her. Nothing. I ended up taking a few days off of work and going to [city], staying in a hotel, making her meet with me, and buying her lunch so that

she could look at my stuff and give me feedback so that I could get my dissertation done.

SH went on to note how this practice continued as a junior faculty member,

So, [woman colleague says] “I’m here to help you, now let’s get some of your things out ... what are you working on? I’ll just coauthor all of it” ... has she ever once asked me to coauthor something with her? No. But instead she comes to me and says, “Hey, let me be second author on pieces you’ve already got in the works.” To me, that’s just unethical.

Unethical behavior was often accompanied by incivility. We frame some of the incivility we experienced as “little jabs” or personal slights. At other times we felt some of our women colleagues treated us with outright disrespect. LL discussed her experiences with incivility as a graduate student.

I didn’t know that my personhood was going to be judged. I guess I find that the most insulting. Not that I can’t pass all of your classes. I can do all of your shit. But no, now you’re going to judge me because you think I don’t spend enough time on my eyelashes? Or my clothes aren’t whatever? It’s like you can’t be your own person unless they’re afraid of you for whatever reason ... [like] if you’re a man. Also I don’t think they gave a shit if I graduated or not. If I had not finished, it would have been just like, “Oh, well, see? She can’t take it. I told you she wasn’t smart enough. I told you she didn’t have it.”

LL went on to discuss a similar experience as a junior faculty member

Once at a conference [another woman colleague in the field] and I were in the hotel lobby chatting and [current woman colleague from institution] came and joined the conversation saying that she had to call the doctor. She’s like, “Oh, I just called the front desk and the hotel doctor came up to the room.” And I was like, “There’s a doctor in the hotel?” I didn’t know there were medical folks at hotels. And she was like, “Of course

there’s a doctor in the hotel,” in a very snooty tone. And then [other colleague] made some comment like “Well, there’s no doctor at the Motel 6!” They had a good laugh over that. Things like that, just those little jabs at my social class here and there that don’t only come from [current colleague], but come from other women in the field too.

SH also recalled experiences with incivility and little jabs that are hurtful. Here she discusses an incident in graduate school,

[Senior woman faculty member] would tell [my instructor], “Well, you’re not going to get much out of her,” or, “She’s not going to live up to your expectations,” or, “She doesn’t understand what it means to be a PhD student.” She would say this in front of me and [my instructor] and then just go on her merry way.

### *OH THE IRONY*

One definition of irony is “a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects” (Oxford, 2020, n.p.). Here we point out two prominent ideas that arose from our dialogic conversations that we see as “deliberately contrary to what one expects.” Those are the irony of working with women who self-identify as feminists but do not seem to practice feminism, and the other is that we are situated in leadership departments, where there seem to be scarce few good examples of good leadership.

LL discussed her time in graduate school, specifically, where she worked with many women who self-identified as feminists, but their actions differed.

In graduate school, [two women advisors] always mocked me for not being what they considered to be feminine enough or concerned about my appearance enough, or not concerned about men enough. I think I am just fine without makeup and without a short skirt, and I think that bothered them. They always talked about how they considered

themselves to be feminists, but I just didn't see it.

To this point, SH noted, "I just think that women should uplift and support other women and they don't."

Alongside working with women who claim to support other women, but in practice do not, we also identified the irony of working in the field of leadership, where there seem to be few examples of quality leadership which is opposed to what we espouse in our programs—to prepare students for leadership roles in schools and districts.

SH articulated this contradiction,

coming into higher ed, it's like this territorial, isolated, noncollaborative environment. And it's very frustrating to me because we teach our principals to be collaborative, to be relational oriented, to create inclusive environments, to be equity oriented, but we don't practice what we say. We don't help each other. I have just not found in higher ed, that anybody really cares about anybody. We don't walk that walk as professors. We don't collaborate and we don't share, and we don't build each other up, and we don't support our novice faculty.

LL agreed noting, "Seriously, these people need some leadership training, ironically, right?"

### ***DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH***

Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that a woman's path within an organization is like a labyrinth because it is paved with biases, discrimination, and other obstacles. A labyrinth, unlike a maze, has no dead ends, and there is only one path. While it has twists and turns, a person cannot get lost as long as they keep moving forward (Johnson, 2000). A labyrinth does not have a map because it is not needed, and this is an extraordinarily difficult lesson to learn (Johnson, 2000). As women from our varied backgrounds and experiences, we

already possess what we need to know to navigate the labyrinth of higher education; self-reliance, resiliency, and self-motivation. We came to this project as researchers and advanced junior faculty with similar experiences of socialization into the academy and encountering challenging women colleagues. Using a duoethnographic research design, we moved past simply complaining or whining about our experiences to a critical reflection about these experiences and how these experiences shaped us as researchers and scholars.

We characterized some of our women colleagues as mean girls and queen bees, and we characterized some of our experiences with them broadly as gaslighting, bait and switch, smoke and mirrors, and oh the irony. While we certainly do not see *all* of our women colleagues, or *all* of our interactions with them through these frames, we have interacted with women colleagues who have, for example, been unsupportive, uncivil, and/or engaged in bullying, and it has impacted us by causing us to question our choices, our value, and our intellect. Albright (n.d.) stated that "there is a special place in hell for women who don't help each other," and we have learned that some of the women we have encountered in HE do not adhere to the feminist philosophy of trust, empathy, and relationships (Young & Marshall, 2013). We both experienced senior women who are unpredictable and cruel, and as junior faculty we found our interactions with them caused undue stress and anxiety. Our interactions with these women were hurtful because they were assigned to support and mentor us through the pretenure years. Instead of getting the support we needed, we had to navigate difficult personalities while trying to understand tenure and promotion expectations on our own.

Ideally, we wanted our senior women colleagues to serve as mentors and role models and to guide us through the labyrinth, but this was not our experience. In fact, many of these women exemplified the stereotypical Queen bee syndrome and used their status as (punch drunk) tenured professors to demean or embar-

rass us, or even worse, try to push us off our career paths (Bednar & Gicheva, 2014). In sharing our experiences with one another, we were able to identify how we navigated the labyrinth, the mean girls, and the queen bees within our institutions. As first-generation women scholars from low-income backgrounds, we developed coping strategies, such as self-reliance, perseverance, and resiliency, to help us succeed, and these skills empowered us to find our own way through the HE labyrinth. Further, we found that often we had to be our own advocates and find networks of support from outside of our home departments or institutions (McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015).

As White women, we realize that our experiences cannot be generalized to other women, especially women of color, who not only have to contend with gender bias but also with racism and Whiteness. We understand that we are situated within an overarching system of White supremacy that works to the advantage of Whites and the disadvantage of people of color. We know that in spite of our other identities that do not adhere to the norms and values of HE (i.e., the norms and values of historically White institutions of HE [similar to those we attended and work in] are White, male, and middle-upper class), being White has advantaged us within these institutions.

As first generation college women from low-income backgrounds, we believe in education. We have devoted our lives to both attaining formal education, teaching, and producing knowledge about education. It has changed our lives and brought us to places, both physically and psychologically, that otherwise would not have been possible. Thus, it is disheartening to us that the academy remains an exclusionary, unwelcoming place for those who fall outside of those traditional norms and values—our focus here on women.

Junior faculty should not be wandering around the labyrinth. Mentors from within the institution should be guiding junior women, reducing the challenges and obstacles along the path; moreover, this process should con-

tinue until there is no confusion (the path is clear), and we do not use terms like “labyrinth” to describe the trajectory through HE. It is time for HE to evolve, to progress, to be civil and humanizing spaces that are liberating rather than uncivil and confining, that are welcoming rather than unwelcoming, that are supportive rather than competitive. Doing so is likely a component of every institution’s mission. It’s time to walk the walk.

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