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Femme-toring: Leveraging critical femininities and femme theory to cultivate alternative approaches to mentoring

Rhea Ashley Hoskin1 | Lilith A. Whiley2

1University of Waterloo and St. Jerome’s University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
2University of Sussex, Falmer, UK

Correspondence
Rhea Ashley Hoskin, University of Waterloo and St. Jerome’s University, Waterloo, ON, Canada.
Email: rheaashleyhoskin@gmail.com

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Abstract
Both traditional and new-wave mentoring (or men-toring), intentionally or unintentionally, maintain and reproduce neoliberal toxic masculinist norms in academia. By applying femme theory and critical femininities frameworks, we expose how men-toring is exclusionary and assimilationist. We then queer and feminize mentoring, developing femme-toring as an alternative reformist approach rooted in fem(me)inist epistemologies and ethics of care, in particular, softness, vulnerability, collaboration, and yielding. Leveraging systems theory and Foucauldian theory, we contend that by centering femininity in these ways, femme-toring unsettles toxic masculinist norms and offers possibilities for a more inclusive academia.

KEYWORDS
critical femininities, femme theory, femme-toring, femmephobia, mentoring, systems theory

1 INTRODUCTION
What tools do we have to guide mentorship that consider gender and power, while also incorporating sexual and gender diversity frameworks? Can mentorship be queered or, more specifically, guided by queer feminine perspectives? In this inter-disciplinary conceptual paper, we critique the underpinnings of mentoring, which we term men-toring, for maintaining and reproducing a neoliberal toxic masculinist status quo. We begin by setting up our guiding theoretical frameworks—critical femininities (Hoskin & Blair, 2022) and femme theory (Hoskin, 2017b, 2021), and explain how
femmephobia (Hoskin, 2020) undergirds the toxic masculinist status quo of academia (Fotaki, 2013; Savigny, 2014). We then turn to mentoring literature and identify two evolving streams. We term the first early articulations of mentoring traditional mentoring; this organizational practice was based on hierarchal relationships between experts and protégés where the former (usually a white heterosexual cisgender man) was tasked with advancing the career of the latter (another white heterosexual cisgender man). We argue that practices of traditional mentoring are exclusionary and explicitly maintain and reinforce an unequal distribution of power. Such practices further enable bullies to “capture and subvert organizational structures and procedures” (Simpson & Cohen, 2004, p. 163), while gatekeeping and gormandizing their position in the status quo. We term the second emergent stream new-wave mentoring and identify these organizational practices as based on democratic relationships that provide both professional and social support in a more egalitarian manner. We then argue that, despite its inclusive aspirations, new-wave mentoring is assimilationist in nature and still serves the patriarchal status quo. Specifically, new-wave mentoring is rooted in notions of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990) and the academic superhero (Pitt & Mewburn, 2016)—neoliberal masculinist ideals that position feminine qualities, as well as feminine and feminized people as “deficient in relation” to a masculinist norm (Dashper, 2019, p. 541).

To facilitate these arguments, we turn to the literature on queer relationality and power “for inspiration on how to use mentoring as a tool that carries the potential of truly promoting gender equality” (Sandager, 2021, p. 1304). Specifically, we consider mentorship literature through a femme framework (Hoskin, 2017b, 2021). In doing so, we develop femme-toring as an alternative lens informed by queer fem(me)inist epistemologies and ethics of care (e.g., Davies & Hoskin, 2021; Goerisch et al., 2019; Hoskin, 2021; Hoskin & Blair, 2022; Humble et al., 2006; Mokhtar & Foley, 2020; Oberhauser & Caretta, 2019). We theorize femme-toring as modeling softness, vulnerability, collaboration, and yielding and leverage both Systems Theory (Luhmann & Gilgen, 2012) and Foucauldian theory (Foucault, 1978) to propose that it is capable of attending to both interpersonal relations and gendered structures of power. Softness, vulnerability, collaboration, and yielding are traits and approaches that femmephobia (Hoskin, 2020) undergirds the toxic masculinist status quo of academia (Fotaki, 2013; Savigny, 2014). We then turn to mentoring literature and identify two evolving streams. We term the first early articulations of mentoring traditional mentoring; this organizational practice was based on hierarchal relationships between experts and protégés where the former (usually a white heterosexual cisgender man) was tasked with advancing the career of the latter (another white heterosexual cisgender man). We argue that practices of traditional mentoring are exclusionary and explicitly maintain and reinforce an unequal distribution of power. Such practices further enable bullies to “capture and subvert organizational structures and procedures” (Simpson & Cohen, 2004, p. 163), while gatekeeping and gormandizing their position in the status quo. We term the second emergent stream new-wave mentoring and identify these organizational practices as based on democratic relationships that provide both professional and social support in a more egalitarian manner. We then argue that, despite its inclusive aspirations, new-wave mentoring is assimilationist in nature and still serves the patriarchal status quo. Specifically, new-wave mentoring is rooted in notions of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990) and the academic superhero (Pitt & Mewburn, 2016)—neoliberal masculinist ideals that position feminine qualities, as well as feminine and feminized people as “deficient in relation” to a masculinist norm (Dashper, 2019, p. 541).

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2 GUIDING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: CRITICAL FEMININITIES & FEMME THEORY

Critical femininities is a growing area of inquiry that “examines femininity through a nuanced, multidimensional framework” (Hoskin & Blair, 2022, p. 1). Rather than focusing solely on femininity as a patriarchal tool used to oppress women, or as an expression of womanhood, critical femininities considers the “historical, ideological, and intersectional underpinnings of femininity, particularly those that contribute to femmephobia” (Hoskin & Blair, 2022, p. 1). A central goal of critical femininities is not only to illuminate feminine multiplicity but also to challenge the masculine epistemological frameworks embedded within gender theory and the ivory tower itself. This goal is especially important in academia, given academia’s role in the creation of knowledge and as an institution that trains and inspires future leaders.

In the quest to dislodge masculine frameworks, many in the field of critical femininities have turned to femme theory (Hoskin, 2017b, 2019; Hoskin & Blair, 2022; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; McCann, 2022; Schwartz, 2022; Taylor, 2018). The term femme originates from 1940s working-class lesbian bar culture, wherein femme was used in reference to a feminine lesbian (i.e., the butch/femme; Hoskin, 2021). While the original use of the term remains true, femme has also evolved to refer to queer feminine folks more broadly (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, 2016). Of particular importance, femme has evolved into a theoretical framework. Femme theory (Hoskin, 2017b) sees femininity as central to understanding the ebbs and flow of power and, thus, argues for the incorporation of femininity within intersectional analyses. Integral to femme theory is the concept of femmephobia, which refers to the systematic
devaluation and regulation of femininity, for example, by positioning femininity as objectionable, undesirable, anti-intellectual, and traits exclusive to heterosexual cisgender women. Femmephobia is distinct from sexism/misogyny in its focus on femininity across bodies and identities, versus oppression targeting women. While femininity and female/woman have a shared and overlapping history, the ability to hone in on the treatment of femininity via femmephobia offers unique insight. The concept of femmephobia not only aids in rendering visible the privileging of masculinity and resulting subordination of femininity but also provides novel solutions to ongoing gender-based issues surrounding homophobia, sexism, transphobia, and toxic masculinity (Hoskin, 2020).

A characteristic of patriarchy is its capacity for reinvention “with each new generational and cultural shift” (Barton & Huebner, 2022, p. 2). Femme theorists argue that, in its contemporary form, patriarchy has been reinvented as femmephobia. For example, as noted by Serano (2007), while openly discriminating against someone for being a woman may be generally considered an undesirable prejudiced attitude, discrimination against or ridiculing another on the basis of femininity is largely considered “fair game” (p. 5) and, worse, an individual is often considered to be deserving of this prejudice (i.e., they asked for it; Hoskin, 2017b). Thus, patriarchy has reinvented itself as a prejudice that has, thus far, received inadequate attention as a source of discrimination deserving of attention: Prejudice against femininity.

Given patriarchy’s propensity for reinventing itself, some scholars have characterized the current state of gender equality as being stalled. Perhaps symptomatically, femininity remains despised such that the freedom with which men versus women adopt “cross-gender” characteristics is not equal (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). In other words, women can adopt masculinity with greater ease than men can adopt femininity, and both are routinely mocked for feminine characteristics (Barton & Huebner, 2022; Hoskin, 2020). Thus, rather than “just” exclusion based on gender/sex (i.e., woman/female), patriarchy has reinvented itself as also exclusion and derision based on femininity—further compounding and occluding the exclusion based on gender/sex. This mutated focus on gender expression (i.e., femininity) versus gender identity or sex (women and female, respectively) is the foundational argument upon which femme theorists focus on femmephobia. In focusing on gender expression (perceived or actual), femmephobia provides a new framework to tackle issues of gender, helping to reveal deeply ingrained practices and assumptions while also looking at issues of sexism/misogyny anew. Rather than a failure or avoidance to recognize and name sexism/misogyny, femmephobia operates to make these prejudices visible and to resist their routinization. Importantly, while previous feminist theorists have discussed femininity as a tool of oppression (See Hoskin, 2017a for an overview), this approach is distinct from femininity’s function as a source of oppression. In other words, existing feminist scholarship has largely scapegoated femininity rather than examined how perceptions, associations, and societal denigration of femininity function to oppress people of all genders (Serano, 2007).

Hegemonic masculinity, patriarchal femininity, and femmephobia function to frame feminine attributes as being in service of men, and the exclusive designation of those assigned female at birth (Hoskin, 2020). In other words, each of these constructs cast femininity as subordinate within hegemonic gender structures, while also naturalizing the norms of femininity. Such a ubiquitous framing of femininity effectively erases and distorts the diverse functions of femininity while upholding masculine ascendancy. Additionally, femmephobic discourses (i.e., discourses that regulate femininity and position it as subordinate) function to shroud and dismiss both the importance and utility of femininity, while maintaining its connection to womanhood as natural (Barton & Huebner, 2022). For example, when tasks, actions, skills, or personality traits are considered “something women and girls are disproportionately good at,” they are at once coded as feminine and constructed as insignificant or trivial by patriarchy (Barton & Huebner, 2022, p. 2). As a result, femininity is rarely considered “compelling, effective, [or] something to emulate” (Barton & Huebner, 2022, p. 3).

By contrast, femme logics of re-thinking, revaluing, disrupting, and rewriting femininity can illuminate effective strategies of resistance (Duggan & McHugh, 1996). For example, while masculinist logics “seek to cast out emotionality, vulnerability, and interdependence in favor of rationality, [and] individualism” (Schwartz, 2022, p. 8), femme logic seeks to revalue feminine qualities, including affective or interpersonal qualities, as political and capable of catalyzing broader systemic change. Critical femininities and femme theory are, thus, important frameworks in the context of
academia wherein masculinist patriarchal structures continue to be perceived as a cultural norm (Fotaki, 2011, 2013; Savigny, 2014). Mentoring, we contend, is one way that femmephobia is leveraged to reproduce toxic masculinist values and reinforce the status quo.

3 | MEN-TORING: MAINTAINING AND REPRODUCING THE STATUS QUO

Mentoring literature to date has developed significantly since the 1950s and has evolved in line with the emergence of empowerment discourses, most notably women's rights in employment and beyond. In reviewing this literature, we identify two dominant streams: (1) Traditional mentoring, which is characterized by early top-down hierarchal organizational structures and authoritarian styles that protected the so-called 'old boys' club'; and (2) New-wave mentoring, which focuses on supporting previously marginalized groups to breach the glass ceiling. In the sections that follow, we argue that neither has led to a more equal, just, and inclusive academia.

3.1 | Traditional mentoring: An exclusionary approach

In Homer's Odyssey, when Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted his son Telemachus to the care of Mentor, who raised the young boy. These patrilineal origins were evident in early conceptualizations of mentoring and regarded it as a nurturing and insightful process "similar to that of a good substitute parent to an adult child" (Anderson & Shannon, 1988, p. 40). Mentorship between the 1950s and 1970s was largely associated with authoritarian style and characterized by competitiveness and top-down control (Bower et al., 2006). Central to the role of mentors was role modeling whereby the "wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied by the protégé" (Anderson & Shannon, 1988, p. 38). These included demonstration lessons, observations, and feedback, as well as support meetings. In these ways, mentors prescribed, modeled, inspired, and promoted professional norms—usually grounded in patriarchal values. Mentoring was mostly performed by older authoritative men in power to promote, advocate for, and support younger men entering their profession. It involves the role of counselor, teacher, adviser, sponsor—even guru (Levinson et al., 1978, p. 97).

In the 1980s, mentoring solidified as a Human Resource Management practice, but it was mostly available to only a few high-talent managers (Kram, 1985). Mentors functioned as professional gatekeepers with a disproportionate amount of power to decide who could join the leadership team and who is ousted; in other words, they preserved the status quo that privileged them and marginalized others (i.e., the old boys' club). Privileges were selectively awarded to white cisgender heterosexual men of a certain status and withheld from women and other minority groups. In this way, mentoring cycles perpetuated and reproduced a system of inequality as protégés developed into mentors, with a vested interest in protecting their favors and limiting their distribution.

Facilitated by traditional mentoring, the old boys' club in academia continues to thrive. Women make up only 28% of professors in Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) (Catalyst, 2020; HESA, 2022). In the UK, only 1% of all professors are Black (HESA, 2022). Elsewhere, such as the United States (US), across Europe, and the Asia-Pacific, men professors consistently outnumber and out earn women professors. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women make up only 24% of academic faculty (UNESCO, 2022). Goerisch et al. (2019) argue that “traditional, formal mentoring structures [...] can be rooted in patriarchal systems of power, hierarchy, and exclusion that perpetuate neoliberal and capitalist understandings of individualism and exceptionalism” (p. 1742). In this highly hierarchical, masculinist, and neoliberal culture reproduced by traditional forms of mentoring, “expectations are stacked against women and under-represented faculty” (Oberhauser & Caretta, 2019, p. 56).

Feminist scholars (e.g., Thornton, 2013; Vayreda, Conesa, Revelles-Benavente, & Ramos, 2019) have long contended that the academic status quo is shaped by neoliberal and masculinist logics (e.g., compete, penetrate, dominate, and win), masculine metrics of productivity and success (e.g., more papers, more grants, publish, or perish
culture, with less value placed on service and teaching), and the tendency for academic practices to not only bolster masculinity over femininity but to actively marginalize women and minority groups. For example, women experience overt sexism in subject areas that are regarded to be traditionally masculine (e.g., engineering, Powell et al., 2009; business, Kelan & Jones, 2010). Marginalization is intersectional, and folks embodying several marginalized intersecting identities (e.g., women of color, LGBTQ+ academics, disabled women) encounter additional discrimination in academia (e.g., Boustan & Taylor, 2020; Brown & Leigh, 2018; McKinney et al., 2021; Ozturk & Rumens, 2014). Toxic academia has, indeed, been deemed a culture of cruelty (Mahmoudi & Keashly, 2021) in which systems of oppression, including sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and racism flourish.

Against this backdrop, and operating in a system wherein gatekeeping and abuses of power are rewarded, bullies and harassers thrive. Those in power, particularly that which is obtained via the progression of traditional mentoring, have a vested interest in preserving “their status by closing opportunities to outsiders” (Watkins et al., 2006, p. 533). McKinney et al. (2021) further note how, “the person with more power controls the dominant culture and sets the stage for access, fairness, and career advancement” (p. 21). Indeed, Simpson and Cohen (2004) point out how bullies exploit “official hierarchies, mentoring systems and probationary reviews to further their abuse of the target and to conceal their aggressive intent” (p. 163) [emphasis added]. In Mansfield et al.’s (2019) critique, the authors identified many ways in which men in academia benefit from sexually harassing women, insidiously gatekeeping the profession and pushing out potential competition, for instance, by questioning their capability for grant applications and delaying promotions. Furthermore, we can observe this gatekeeping being replicated in the publication sphere where feminist approaches and knowledge are systematically excluded (e.g., Bell et al., 2019; Cunliffe, 2022).

Those who use traditional mentoring to gatekeep and guard power have a vested interest in promoting and progressing protégés who hold similar views—for they are the least likely to challenge this status quo. Unfortunately, it does pay to be sexist; research shows that those who hold sexist views incur more positive advantages in the workplace (e.g., more promotions) than less sexist colleagues (Watkins et al., 2006). This is so even for women who, by participating in the sexist culture, receive status benefits (Alonso & O’Neill, 2022). Locke et al. (2021) found that women academics who were successful in leveraging opportunities in this neoliberal masculinist landscape, do so by reproducing “existing structures and inequalities in the university” (p. 1093). Indeed, as women advance in organizations into top positions, they become less (and not more) supportive of equal opportunity programs (Ng & Chiu, 2001). Studies also show that women in senior leadership roles express less support toward the advancement of other women’s careers (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006), especially junior colleagues whom they are tasked with mentoring (Faniko et al., 2017). This is not to blame women. Rather, these examples highlight how traditional mentoring protects and reproduces the masculinist status quo by gatekeeping and selectively permitting entrance into the old boys’ club, including by weaponizing minoritized groups against each other.

3.2 | New-wave mentoring: An assimilationist approach

As women and other minority groups gained greater employment rights from the 1990s onwards, there was a growing recognition that mentoring could be deployed as a tool to allow previously marginalized groups to enter the fortified old boys’ club that had heretofore been preserved via traditional mentoring. This leveraging of mentoring (i.e., new-wave mentoring) focused on helping marginalized protégées, often women, “circumvent structural, social, and cultural barriers to advancement in the organization” (Bower et al., 2006, p. 2). Of particular interest was women’s access to high-power mentors, identifying barriers to effective mentorship, and outcomes of mentoring (Burke & McKeen, 1990). Definitions of mentoring also evolved to include more democratic and relational values. Mentoring was regarded as “a personal relationship” and an “educational process” that included “nurturing, advising, befriending, and instructing” (Mullen, 2017, p. 36). The mentor was tasked with supporting and developing their protégé, “in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking” (Meggison et al., 2006, p. 13). Mentoring was deemed so critical to organizational life that Ragins (2012) ascribes to it the “very essence of positive relationships at work”.

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Through these relationships, the protégé learns, socializes, and progresses in academia. The mentor shares the “rules that govern effective behavior in the organization” (Allen et al., 2004, p. 128) and “serve[s] as veteran models of behavior for their protégés”.

Promisingly, there was also a growing appreciation of the importance of diversity in mentoring, along with a critique of the application of western best practices in international contexts (Ragins et al., 2001). The salience of intersectional axes of identity such as ethnicity (e.g., mentoring Black women academics in a predominantly white university, Edwards-Alexander, 2005) and sexual orientation (e.g., safe mentors for LGBTQ+ folks on campus; Mulcahy et al., 2016) in mentoring was finally recognized and several schemes and programs were developed to steer women and minority groups into the boardroom. Instead of protecting the old boys’ club, mentoring was touted as the means to access—it would improve the representation of women in senior roles, their participation in professional networks, and even research performance (Gardiner et al., 2007). Yet, despite these promising developments and aspirational goals, there are several pitfalls in new-wave mentoring, and academia remains entrenched in “male norms”, inhibiting everyone else from participating equally (Fotaki, 2013, p. 1269).

Despite its equal opportunity imperative, new-wave mentoring nevertheless reinforces and reproduces a masculinist status quo through assimilationist practices that perpetuate the assumption that the ideal worker (Acker, 1990) is still a white heterosexual masculine cisgender man—and that to be successful, we must perform like one. Thornton (2013) describes the ideal academic as someone who thrives in the competitive culture of academia; they are “a scientific researcher with business acumen who produces academic capitalism” (p. 127). Pitt and Mewburn (2016) specify this academic super hero as, “multi-talented, always ready and available”; someone who “conforms to university strategic priorities [...] and is always alert [...] collecting business cards for that next round of student placements [...] publishing prodigiously and creating innovative learning opportunities for students across multiple media” (p. 12). Historically, men have exemplified this hyper-productive ideal—unlike women who have had to labor in the home as well as in paid employment and are thus “other” to the always available ideal worker. For instance, part-time work is disproportionately skewed toward women with 38% of women in the UK in part-time employment as compared to 13% of men (House of Commons, 2022). Yet, Durbin and Tomlinson (2014) found an immense shortage of mentors who positively role model part-time working. Men academics on the other hand were “less aware of the potential conflict between paid and unpaid work [...] and enjoy the benefits of unpaid female labor and take this for granted” (Bagilhole, 2002, p. 23).

The insidious “assumptions about commitment and competence are so linked with the idealized images of men and masculinity that the achievements of men and especially women that do not conform to these images are hardly recognized” (Bleijenbergh et al., 2013, p. 23). Indeed, markers of success are highly gendered in academia and are valued at the expense of other feminized forms of academic labor such as service work, pastoral care, and teaching, which are disproportionately performed by women and other minority faculty (Probert, 2005; Santos & Van Phu, 2019). These emotionally laborious and time-intensive caring activities are known as the “housework” of universities (Brabazon & Murray, 2015)—hidden, yet necessary, but not rewarded even though academic caring-labor is “essential for achieving goals of equity, faculty well-being, and the sustainability of universities” (Altan-Olcay & Bergeron, 2022, p. 1); yet, masculinist logics are what drive markers of success at the expense of “feminized and locally bound care” practices (Lund & Tienari, 2019, p. 98). Even “lean in” mentoring discourses that explicitly target women do so by promoting power whereby mentors men-tor women into assimilation, emulating the masculine to succeed (Jackson, 2017).

For example, one of the benefits of new-wave mentoring is access to professional networks; this is because mentors open up exclusive social networks that would otherwise be unavailable to the protégé(e) (Dreher & Ash, 1990). The relationships formed in these privileged social circles are crucial for career advancement; they facilitate research projects, entrance into prestigious committee groups, prized references, promotions, and research funding (Todd & Bird, 2000). They are a “form of social capital” (Webber & Giuffre, 2019, p. 6). However, by positioning this social capital exclusively within the realm of the masculine, men-toring suppresses and delegitimizes feminine strategies. New-wave mentoring is thus assimilationist at its core, reproducing toxic neoliberal masculinist norms by promoting proximity to men (often white cisgender heterosexual men) as the source and access to power; meanwhile, feminine ontologies and epistemologies are marginalized.
This subjugation and regulation of the feminine manifests in academia through the marginalization of feminine ontologies and epistemologies—in other words, the devalorization of feminine knowledge and ways of knowing. For example, a recent study examining 1 million doctoral dissertations between 1980 and 2010 found widespread bias against feminine research, distinct from bias toward woman-focused research (Kim et al., 2022). This widespread devaluing of femininity occludes our ability to integrate feminine practices or recognize the utility of feminine strategies. In these ways, marginalization is propagated at the interpersonal level in mentoring fundamentals (e.g., what we construct as success, what we value and prize) and mentors’ behaviors (e.g., advice on where to publish, what forms of labor to prioritize) as junior scholars are mentored to emulate neoliberal masculinist markers of hyper-productive success.

In reviewing mentorship literature, we observe that previous forms of mentoring (i.e., traditional and new-wave) are either largely exclusionary or assimilationist in nature. Neither approach aligns with fem(me)inist values. We note several ways that mentoring is (ab)used and how mentoring practices are complicit in marginalizing the non-ideal “other” academic, who is left in an awkward position—assimilate and collude or be left outside (Fotaki, 2011). As critical femininities academics, researchers, and mentors, we are left wondering what reformist approaches might exist.

4 | FEMME-TORING: A REFORMIST APPROACH

Given the limitations of mentoring described above, we offer femme-torring as an alternative paradigm that enables a reformist approach (see Table 1). Femme-toring breaks away from the masculinist neoliberal logics of mentoring by deliberately valuing and centering feminine qualities as an interpersonal method of catalyzing broader systemic change. In developing femme-torring, we bring together and build upon the inter-disciplinary feminist literature vis-à-vis mentoring (e.g., Dashper, 2019; Falconer Al-Hindi, 2019; Goerisch et al., 2019; Harris, 2022; Humble et al., 2006; Mokhtar & Foley, 2020; Moss et al., 1999; Oberhauser & Caretta, 2019; Sandager, 2021), while turning to the queer margins to think mentoring anew.

We apply critical femininities (Hoskin & Blair, 2022) to theorize femme-torship and draw on systems theory (Mele et al., 2010) and Foucauldian approaches to power (1978) to illustrate how centralizing femininity offers a novel opportunity to catalyze broader institutional change in academia. In line with critical femininities and femme theory, femme-torship is a response to recent calls to give voice to the “complexities and complications” of femininities (e.g., Cunliffe, 2022; Lewis et al., 2019; Pullen et al., 2019). Such approaches are vital to not only make visible the taken-for-granted masculinist epistemological and ontological approaches to mentoring relationships but also to evaluate and improve existing conditions within academic institutions.

In line with femme theory, femme-toring aims to illuminate masculinity’s taken-for-granted presence and to specifically consider how: (1) femininity and feminized people have been systematically disregarded, trivialized, and excluded; and (2) how practices can be revised to make the value and importance of femininity salient. In proposing femme-torring, we echo past femme theorists who have argued that embracing soft feminine traits including emotionality, relationality, and vulnerability opens up additional sites of feminine political potential (Schwartz, 2022; Scott, 2022). Importantly, our use of femininity here is not presented as an argument for the adoption of feminine esthetic or even identity but, rather, specific to how one feels, relates, and communicates (Schwartz, 2022). Moreover, like femme-inst research practices, femme-torship employs “femininities, rather than women” as central tenants of analysis through which to “reconsider (and change)” the value and meaning afforded to femininity (Dahl, 2010, p. 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Men-toring and femme-toring.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men-toring</strong></td>
<td><strong>Femme-toring</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional mentoring</td>
<td>New-wave mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusionist</td>
<td>Assimilationist</td>
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<td>Reformist</td>
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**TABLE 1** Men-toring and femme-toring.
However, unlike femme-inist research articulated by Dahl (2010), we employ femininities as a means of eliciting change in both the meaning of femininity and the treatment of women (as well as non-binary people and men). Specifically, through femininities we seek to elicit institutional change via mentorship style. By offering femme-toring as an alternative to men-toring, we refute the masculinist values that occupy academia and, instead, generate opportunities to collectively and collaboratively reconstruct via feminine epistemologies and ontologies.

4.1 | A good mentor: Naming femininity

We have discussed at length the qualities and strategies of mentoring that are ineffective and that contribute to ongoing systemic oppression; what, then, makes a good mentor? In a review of the literature, Davis (2020) found “qualities on the affective dimension” to hold the greatest salience among students, including “accessibility, interest, enthusiasm, personal respect” (p. 3) as well as those of nurturing orientation. Supporting this finding, a recent study asked postgraduate research students across disciplines to name five qualities of an ideal mentor (Davis, 2020). Across each of the identified categories (person-related, fundamental aspects of supervision, candidate-oriented, discipline, and research), affective qualities were used to characterize ideal mentorship. These affective qualities included approachability, accessibility, interest, respect, and commitment. Davis, 2020, also found affective qualities to be among the main characteristics of importance. Similarly, Makhamreh and Stockley (2019) suggested nurturance to be a good quality for mentors, as well as showing vulnerability, relationality, being present and mindful, allowing space for growth, and autonomy, including both hands-on and hands-off approaches as needed (Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019).

The absence of these qualities, Davis (2020) argues, leads to both negligence and toxicity in mentoring relationships. For instance, scholars have outlined egocentrism as a negative mentor attribute, thus urging mentors to leave their egos “at the door, so that you can fulfill the needs of others” (Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019, p. 8). Additionally, over-authoritarian mentorship styles, as well as those that exhibited apathy, uncontrolled ego, “selfishness, lack of mindfulness, ignorance and bullying (threatening and excessive feedback)” have been characterized as “toxic” (Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019, p. 9). Indeed, these qualities fuel what Pelletier et al. (2019) call the toxic triangle, which refers to the three main components required to establish and maintain toxic academia: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive or enabling environments.

In the process of naming a “good” mentor, the gendered-coded nature of mentor attributes begins to take shape. It not only becomes apparent that many of the qualities (e.g., hyper competitiveness) normalized in men-toring relationships can be categorized as masculine, but that many of these masculine-coded qualities have been deemed toxic or abusive within previous literature. By contrast, femme theory names femininity as undergirding effective mentoring while highlighting how each masculine quality can be contrasted by femininity to achieve a more productive, inclusive, and worldmaking practice (see Table 2). Through the lens of femme theory, we can see how:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>Relationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigidity and controlling</td>
<td>Accessibility, flexibility, adaptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego</td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td>Nurturance and interconnectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micromanagement</td>
<td>Yielding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>Present and mindful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-authoritarianism</td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
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TABLE 2 Gendered mentoring qualities.
these characteristics are gendered and that (2) the qualities associated with good mentorship exist within femme approaches to power and relationality. Drawing on femme scholars’ articulation of gendered power and relationality (e.g., Barton & Huebner, 2022; Hoskin & Blair, 2022; Schwartz, 2022; Scott, 2022), we argue that this list of masculine/feminine qualities supports what we propose to be the four key principles of femme-torship: (1) softness; (2) vulnerability; (3) collaboration; and (4) yielding. Femme scholars have written at length about each principle as under-valued feminine powers. In developing femme-toring, we synthesize and apply the important theoretical foundations set up by femme scholars in the creation of a relational tool (Hoskin & Whiley, in press). These qualities are not intended to be exhaustive of femme-torship, but rather serve as an invitation to consider the value of femininity and its application to the workplace and beyond. We encourage dialog and further research to extend these ideas.

4.1.1 | Softness

The valuing and reclaiming of femininity are quintessential femme endeavors. Among the many feminine qualities, esthetics, and practices reclaimed by femmes and femme scholars, a growing body of work has examined the “soft” side of femininity as a means of rethinking power structures. According to femme theorists, softness is a combination of emotionality, tenderness, interdependence, vulnerability, and relationality (Schwartz, 2022); qualities which are “disparaged by masculinist society” (p. 6). Here, Schwartz (2022) argues that discourses of “softness” can be used to articulate belonging, resist neoliberal masculinist logics and, most importantly, challenge the masculinist status quo. Indeed, Jackson (2021) eloquently exemplifies Schwartz’ work on softness, stating how, “What I view as a strength, willingness to learn from others and the capacity to model that trait from a position of power, looks like weakness and softness to others with more macho and charismatic orientations” (p. 27). Thus, what is needed is the reconstruction of softness as a desirable trait rather than a weakness.

4.1.2 | Vulnerability

Similarly, femme scholarship also has a long history of nuancing the power of vulnerability (Harris & Crocker, 1997; Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1992; Scott, 2022). Vulnerability opens up a new state of power relations that allows for authentic interpersonal sharing, including purported weaknesses, flaws, and failures (Barton & Huebner, 2022; Scott, 2022). Displays of vulnerability are not only at odds with the more masculine characteristics of egoism, dominance, rigidity, and hierarchy but are also perceived as courageous acts by both men and women (Brown, 2015). Indeed, vulnerability requires us to shed the false façade of success and its security and, instead, open ourselves up to humility and imperfection. Femme-torship practices that place value on "soft" feminine traits (e.g., emotionality, relationality, vulnerability, nurturance, interconnectivity, empathy) are arguably a method of resisting "neoliberal calls for rationality and a certain kind of productivity" (Schwartz, 2022, p. 4) and stand in opposition to egoism and dominance. Moreover, given that many in the field have described femme as a mode of healing (Cvetkovich, 2003), femme theory surfaces as the ideal framework through which to reconsider men-toring norms that have, thus far, yielded toxicity, oppression, and exclusion within the academy.

4.1.3 | Collaboration

For nearly 2 decades, femme scholars have established collaboration as a form of femme-inist praxis. For example, Duggan and McHugh’s (1996) concept of femme science is described as soliciting "loving, grateful collaboration" (p. 169). In a similar vein, Dahl (2010) describes femme-inist research as highlighting "citation, collaboration and co-production of ideas" (p. 1). Here, Dahl (2010, p. 2) explains that a central value of femme-inist research is collaborations that “aim to produce knowledge collectively.” Like femme-inist research, femme-torship "critiques the radical
individualism, self-congratulatory nature” of academic traditions (Dahl, 2010, p. 3). Such abstract individualism in academia “isolates us from one another” and stands in opposition to collaborative approaches (Phelan, 1989, p. 5). Collaboration, on the other hand, necessitates the ability to forge connections, find a point of alignment, practice relationality, and allow for self-determination. Furthermore, collaboration has been described as a feminine power that aids individuals in better meeting mutual goals (Barton & Huebner, 2022). Collaboration is an act of reaching out to achieve greater inclusion and, thus, constitutes an act of solidarity (Abdellatif, 2021; Weatherall, 2020). Indeed, kinship networks are critical for minority groups, such as trans communities (Siegel, 2019). Collaborative approaches stand in opposition to traditional men-tership practices that tend to be guided by competitiveness, over-authoritarianism, hierarchy, rigidity, and control. Thus, in terms of mentoring strategy, a femme praxis would include lateral mentorship that is markedly collaborative in nature—not above them but beside them (Makhamreh & Stockley, 2019). Importantly, pointing out the masculinist values inherent in men-terning practices is not “reverse sexism,” rather, both women and men express discomfort toward overtly competitive environments (Pecis, 2016; Pecis & Priola, 2019). Collaboration is, rather, a trust-building practice that supports women, non-binary people, and men while bolstering other facets of femme-tership, including yielding and softness.

4.1.4 | Yielding

Critical femininities and feminist scholars alike have noted that patriarchal power structures dictate that “to be powerful is to have power over;” or to dominate (Barton & Huebner, 2022, p. 29). Barton and Huebner (2022) argue that this notion of power is contrasted by feminine forms of power, specifically the concept of yielding. Our use of the term “yielding” comes from femme and femininities scholarship theorizing feminine forms of power (Barton & Huebner, 2022). While we recognize that this term can carry negative connotations, we see the value in its use, especially to help tether our understanding of power and mentorship to existing femininities scholarship. Yielding requires flexibility, adaptability, and relationality and could be understood as being symbolically malleable while maintaining integral form. Moreover, yielding as a feminine form of power stands in contrast to the masculine-coded qualities of unyielding, including toughness, rigidity, refusal to admit wrong-doing, insistence on “alpha” status, and aggressive responses to perceived slights (Barton & Huebner, 2022). While feminine-coded mentorship approaches may prove effective and masculine-coded styles are arguably ineffective and create hostile climates, feminine powers like yielding suffer “conditions of inarticulation” such that the very nature of their being (feminine) is the reason they are cast away as trivial (Barton & Huebner, 2022, p. 24). In an environment driven by egoism and domination, the ability to employ deference and graciously accept differences of opinion, while not taking them personally, demonstrates the power of yielding as a worldmaking feminine approach to mentorship.

4.2 | Femme-toring, femininity & systemic change

By upholding and reproducing masculine qualities as the valued norm via men-tering practices, many mentor relations are implicated in femmephobic worldmaking. Femme theory as a new worldmaking endeavor—a counter-discourse to reigning masculine power structures—holds the potential to shift these norms via: (1) naming them and illuminating the deeply embedded masculine ascendency in academia; and (2) providing a new narrative of valuing feminine qualities, labor, and skills. From systems theory and Foucauldian perspectives, these shifts can mobilize greater systemic change.

Systems theory views “a phenomenon seen as whole and not simply the sum of elementary parts” (Mele et al., 2010, p. 127). This perspective argues that “we are not able to fully comprehend a phenomenon simply by breaking it up into elementary parts and then reforming it; we instead need to apply a global vision to underline its functioning” (Mele et al., 2010, p. 126). We can, however, begin by analyzing “elementary components of a
phenomenon” as a means of gaining greater holistic insight into the broader phenomenon (Mele et al., 2010, p. 126). Thus, by focusing on the “interactions” and “relationships between parts” (i.e., mentoring as an elementary component), a systems view helps to understand both underlying function and the status quo (Mele et al., 2010, p. 127). And so, using a systems perspective, we must shift our attention from “the part to the whole,” while also oscillating between holism and reductionism (Mele et al., 2010, p. 126). For instance, systems theory argues that a system is comprised of a number of interrelated and interdependent elements. In other words, “a system is a relationship of parts that work together in an organized manner to accomplish a common purpose” (Buchanan, 2019, p. 86). A disruption to one element gives rise to changes in the other elements and, thus, the entire system (i.e., the status quo). As we argue, the system in academia is an interlocking matrix of oppression that maintains cis-heteropatriarchal oppression, and one part of that system is masculine ascendency. Thus, by disrupting one part of the system via femme-torship we see this approach to mentorship as capable of igniting a shift in the academic landscape.

A Foucauldian perspective furthers this theoretical capacity for change. From a Foucauldian (1978) perspective of power and resistance, power is renegotiated through epistemologies and ontologies from the margins, and thus “change emerges gradually through minute shifts in power” (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019, p. 15). Within masculine domains such as academia, the margins are often feminized. Thus, femininity offers a counter-discourse to masculine prevailing norms, generating the minute shifts in power necessary to instigate broader structural change. Taken together, we anchor our claim of femme-torship’s capacity to instigate change on its function as a counter-discourse that provides the minute shifts in power (as suggested by Foucault, 1978), and that these “minute shifts” have the capacity to generate a ripple effect throughout the institution (as suggested by systems theory).

Of course, not all mentoring takes the shape of men-toring. Take, for instance, the peer-to-peer mentoring that occurs between colleagues or people of equal career rank. While two colleagues may be otherwise equal, not centering feminine qualities via femme-torship runs the risk of reinscribing other existing social hierarchies outside of the workplace (e.g., those based in race, heterosexism, sexism, and ableism). Thus, a framework that deliberately centers feminine qualities in mentorship relations, whether among peers or between those at different career ranks, serves as a counter-discourse that challenges other structures of power unrelated to work seniority while ensuring interpersonal relations do not inadvertently adopt men-toring approaches.

### 4.3 Limitations & caveats: Toxic femininity & the gender binary

While we argue for the valuing of femininity via femme-torship practices, this is not to argue in support of a gender binary. Rather, given that the gender binary is both divided and hierarchical (Hoskin, 2020), with masculinity and men on top and women and femininity on the bottom, valuing femininity functions to challenge the gender binary rather than uphold it. Further, it may seem that categorizing softness, vulnerability, collaboration, and yielding as feminine characteristics reproduces traditional or essentialist gender logic. Without reservation, we advise against the reproduction of essentialist gender logic. Instead, we urge readers who may feel discomfort over the potential reification of the gender binary, or who may use this argument to reify the gender binary, to consider if this alignment can be traditional if these feminine qualities are valued across bodies and identities (e.g., softness in men)? What would make this alignment essentialist or traditional? What would make this alignment essentialist or traditional? What would make this alignment essentialist or traditional?

Critical femininities scholars argue that patriarchal femininity can be defined as a process “through which gendered behaviors, labor, manners, interests, and self-presentation (to name a few) are made subordinate. Importantly, these characteristics are not inherently inferior but are rendered subordinate via hegemonic gender systems and reigning masculine ascendency” (Taylor & Hoskin, 2023, p. 7). When qualities such as softness, vulnerability, collaboration, and yielding are aligned with femininity in ways that are: (1) not enforced upon bodies assigned female at birth; and (2) valued (rather than devalued) in ways that challenge patriarchal structure (i.e., the masculinist status quo), this categorization is anything
but traditional—it is femme. And, like femmes’ mischaracterization as “traditional” throughout the history of butch/femme communities, this flattening of feminine subversiveness only serves to occlude feminine diversity and power (Hoskin, 2021).

Of course, there are limitations; femininity can be “toxic” too, for example, patriarchal femininity (Hoskin, 2017b), and neoliberal femininity (Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). Toxic forms of femininity are “rigid and ‘toxic’ attachments that maintain the gendered power structure/essentialized gender binary at various intersections of gender, class, the body, sexuality, and race” (McCann, 2022, p. 19) and do not align with femme principles. Critical femininities and femme theory provide an especially opportune tool to unpack these dynamics of gender and power, but even more importantly, to resist and reject the reproduction of insidious norms in the next generation of academics of all genders via femme-toring practices. As noted by previous scholars, the ability to recognize femininity as “powerful rather than natural is personally transformative, depgrams patriarchal conditioning, stabilizes systems of domination, advances social justice goals, and diminishes femmephobia” (Barton & Huebner, 2022, p. 31). Thus, we see femme-torship as a type of worldmaking in which discursive and symbolic practices of centering femininity begin to systemically alter academic relations, spaces, and environments.

5 | CONCLUSION

Reflecting on femmephobic practices across a variety of domains, many femme theorists have asked readers to consider what it would be like to exist in a world that values femininity; how might communities, cultures, institutions, and practices be altered by this seemingly simple act (Hoskin, 2021; Middleton, 2019)? Building on this question, we ask readers to consider what is lost in severing feminine qualities from men-toring practices within academic institutions and to also consider what may be gained by centering femininity via femme-toring. By valuing qualities associated with femininity that are often discarded in place of their masculine counterparts, and purposefully centralizing them as core components used to guide mentorship practices, the concept of femme-torship challenges academic norms predicated on assimilation, domination, and hierarchy. More specifically, through femme principles of softness, yielding, and collaboration, femme-torship holds the potential to reshape toxic academic practices using interpersonal relations as the catalyst for broader change. Men-toring is a gendered practice that reproduces the invisible assumptions, values, and norms that maintain and calcify patriarchal powers. Through the lens of femme theory and femmephobia, the deeply ingrained, naturalized masculinist gender system into which patriarchy has reinvented itself is made visible. It is only by making these structures visible that the insidious nature of gender and power may be challenged.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

ORCID

Lilith A. Whiley https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9605-4534
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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Rhea Ashley Hoskin is a SSHRC and AMTD Global Talent Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Waterloo and St. Jerome's University where she is cross-appointed to the departments of Sociology & Legal Studies and Sexuality, Marriage, & Family Studies. Her work focuses on critical femininities, femme theory, and femmephobia.

Lilith A. Whiley is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex located in the United Kingdom and co-chairs the GWO specialized network on Gender & Health at Work. Lilith is an interdisciplinary researcher and is interested in the intersection of marginalized identities, health, and work.