A MENTOR: STRANGER, FRIEND, MIRROR, and COMPASS.

By

Patricia B. Lerch (UNC Wilmington) and Erika Bourguignon (Ohio State University)

Abstract

What do mentors tell their students about being an anthropologist? How is this message conveyed? Often times it is conveyed through the mentor’s publications that are carefully combed by the student for hints on how to be a successful anthropologist. Sometimes it is filtered through situational advice written as letters to the student working in the field. A mentor is a stranger and a friend, to paraphrase Hortense Powermaker’s book title about fieldwork. She is a stranger because she is often older and of another generation whose life is partially hidden from view. She becomes a friend when she offers herself as a role model for her students to follow. Her life holds up a mirror and her advice acts as a compass to paraphrase Erika Bourguignon’s depiction of the salient aspects of anthropology. A student looks at her mentor’s life and hopes to read something in that life that will give her the courage to follow in the mentor’s footsteps. The student clings to her mentor’s advice like a sailor who is lost at sea clings to her compass searching for the right direction. This paper reflects on the mentoring relationship between Hortense Powdermaker and Erika Bourguignon as described in publication and public presentation by Bourguignon and a record of mentoring that is preserved in letters between Bourguignon and Lerch when Lerch conducted her first field research in Brazil.

Introduction

The title of our presentation borrows words from the title of Powdermaker’s book on her life and field work entitled Stranger and Friend. The Way of the Anthropologist (1966) and from a lecture by Bourguignon (1986) entitled “Anthropology: Mirror and Compass.” Bourguignon was a student of Powdermaker’s at Queens College and Lerch was a student of Bourguignon and admirer of Stranger and Friend. The Way of the Anthropologist (1966), which she often used as a text for undergraduate anthropology courses. The metaphor of ‘anthropology as a mirror for man’ comes from Kluckhohn (1949), and, Bourguignon expanded the phrase to include the idea that anthropology provides both a mirror and a compass in a lecture she gave to the Graduate School at The Ohio State University in
1986. Many years later, on February 20, 2009 at The Mershon Center on the campus of The Ohio State University, a symposium in honor of Erika Bourguignon’s 85th birthday-- entitled “Mirrors and Compasses”--took up the themes of memory as compass, memoir as mirror, experience and memory, altered states, gender, and religious experience, art, anthropology and the African Diaspora and reflected on the life and writings of Erika Bourguignon.¹ This symposium encouraged Lerch to ask Bourguignon to reflect with her on mentoring and the metaphors of strangers and friends and mirrors and compasses which suggested the title for this presentation. Mentors often begin as strangers due to factors like age, gender, ethnicity, race, and experience, but may evolve over time to become friends and professional colleagues. The mentor provides a kind of ‘mirror’ for students who look into the mirror where they see not a reflection of the mentor alone but also a compass to guide them successfully into the profession.

Mentoring is institutionalized at most universities today. But before the era of civil rights and feminism, it was far less politicized. At Ohio State University, Erika Bourguignon chaired the Council of Academic Excellence for Women and recalls that after 1980 mentoring of women took on a more formalized form. Today this formalization is an expectation at the University of North Carolina Wilmington where the Center for Faculty

¹ “Mirrors & Compasses.” An 85th Birthday Symposium for Erika Bourguignon. Presented by The Ohio State University Center for Folklore Studies. Friday, February 20, 2009. The Mershon Center, 1501 Neil Avenue, Columbus, Ohio.
Leadership offers stipends to full professors, asking them to mentor assistant professors from other departments. Mentors play many roles—supporter, role model, facilitator, gatekeeper, protector, coach, supervisor, parent substitute, guru, patron, counselor, confidant, and successful leader (Semeniuk and Worral 2000:409). For advanced graduate students, mentors are said to facilitate “the realization of a Dream” (Crawford and Smith 2005:54).

In this presentation some of the dimensions of the mentoring relationship that we experienced over the course of our careers are discussed. To begin with, we prefer the term role model to mentor since both of our early experiences with mentoring came before the formalization of mentoring on campuses but also because the phrase role model implies that the person who is modeled may not perceive this or act consciously to be a role model. This will be discussed more below. Secondly, in most cases, it is a student who models the behavior of the professional anthropologist. The professional anthropologist and the student are engaged in a hierarchical relationship made more complex by generational and background differences. Friendship may develop over time as these initial differences seem less defining of the relationship. Modeling or mirroring plays an important role as the student attempts to ‘see the future’ in the professional life of the role model. Guidance and advice, which acts as a compass pointing in the desired direction that the student and mentor
believe will lead to success in the profession, is crucial to the relationship. The mentoring relationship is one of role modeling, which is complicated by hierarchy, ethnic background, age, and gender and which at best provides a mirror and a compass to initially guide the junior partner toward a successful professional life but over time lead to collaborative research, too.

Women in Anthropology

Role models are encountered at all stages of life, of course, but some are remembered more than others. In 1991, Erika Bourguignon published a paper entitled “Hortense Powdermaker, The Teacher,” about her memories of Powdermaker as her undergraduate professor at Queens College during the war years of 1941-1945. In a later interview, Bourguignon recalled Powdermaker’s “elaborate, stylish hats,” and her course on “minorities” that “opened exciting ideas concerning cultural universals and cultural relativism” (Rich 1999:50). Powdermaker “liked to teach,” and, even though she was also an active field researcher, she revealed little of this side of her professional life to her students at that time (1991:417). Bourguignon described her as a demanding and challenging teacher, with a strong personality and definite ideas, and “remarkably impersonal in her classes” (1991:424). Yet for a young woman pondering her own future in the summer of 1945, Bourguignon found encouragement from Powdermaker’s counsel about a professional life in anthropology, when she wrote in a letter: “I am always for following one’s true interests. I think I told you earlier—
that there were not too many jobs in anthropology and still fewer for women. However, if you are willing to take the chance, I’m happy to back you.” Years later Bourguignon recalled that Powdermaker added the qualification that there were few jobs in anthropology, that is, “if you were a woman and if you were Jewish.” But, Bourguignon remembered thinking that “she (Powdermaker) had done it herself” (Rich 1999:51). With Powdermaker’s support, Bourguignon entered graduate school at Northwestern University where she studied under Hallowell and Herksovits. By 1948, Erika Bourguignon’s relationship with Powdermaker evolved from student to peer as Powdermaker’s letters to Bourguignon in the field revealed. Bourguignon recalled that Powdermaker wrote to her while in Haiti that she did not particularly care for administrative work and that she was then focusing on her current research project on Hollywood, which gave her release time from her teaching duties (Bourguignon 1991:418-419). Their former hierarchal student-professor relationship changed as the former professor shared some of her own personal reflections on professional life with her new colleague. Shortly after this letter, Erika Bourguignon became a faculty member at The Ohio State University from 1949 until her retirement from full-time teaching in 1990.

Earlier we mentioned that perception in mentoring plays an important role in the kind of role modeling that occurs. Following the publication of Stranger and Friend, many generations of students learned, as Bourguignon
1991:426) put it, “the way of an anthropologist.” From the obituaries written following her death in 1970 and the publication of a Special Issue in the Journal of Anthropological Research on “The Legacy of Hortense Powdermaker” in 1991, we read of the wide-ranging impact she had on many anthropologists and colleagues who also saw her as a mentor and role model (Cherneff 1991). (See also: Trager 1971; Wolf 1971). Perhaps Erika Bourguignon summed it up best by saying that Hortense Powdermaker “made it clear . . . that being an anthropologist was a possibility” (Fauss 1982:2). Powdermaker’s ‘Legacy’ reached Lerch through her link to Bourguignon and her own reading of Stranger and Friend, which she went on to assign to her students so they might gain an historical perspective on the ‘way of an anthropologist.’ The Socratic Teaching Method used skillfully by Powdermaker, and, also by Bourguignon, did not translate across the generations as easily to Lerch’s students who responded better to more structured discussions, but occasionally this approach did take root and everyone benefited from its stimulating style.

Finding a role model within the Anthropology of Women

Mentors or role models create the necessary intellectual space within the profession for their students. For example, Erika Bourguignon made women students comfortable within the profession of anthropology by debunking the myth that the field had always been dominated by men (Bourguignon 1983). The 1970s saw a growing interest in the ‘status of
women’ in human societies and in anthropology and much valuable work was done to correct what was being perceived as an inherent male bias in the field and a natural tendency toward universal male dominance in human society. In her graduate class on the Anthropology of Women and in her writings, two points became clear about anthropology, women, and culture. Bourguignon, cautioning against “myth building—adjusting the evidence of the past to fit some momentary needs,”—urged women and others to look closely at the central role played by women anthropologists in our field (1983:59-60). Bourguignon took many opportunities, such as an interview for the Ohio State University Center for Women Studies publication Sojourner, to emphasize that “Women have made contributions to anthropology all along—in a variety of ways . . . There have been women researchers important to the field such as Margaret Mead, Hortense Powdermaker, Margaret Silberman, Ruth Benedict—to mention only a few. At the end of the 19th Century, there was a Women’s Anthropological Society in Washington” (Fauss 1982:3). While women fieldworkers were clearly making important contributions to anthropology that began to correct male bias in reporting about nonwestern society, Bourguignon provided greater understanding to this by reminding her students and readers that there have always been women fieldworkers who she reminded us, “although women anthropologists have studied the “feminine aspects of life,” they have also made significant contributions to general ethnography, and not limited
themselves to a mere segment of the cultures under investigation.” (Bourguignon 1983:60). Women anthropologists had made the study of women’s lives and women’s status important to anthropology before the 1970s. The comparative perspective adopted by the Anthropology of Women class was useful to women’s studies because “It is important for women to realize that our position as women is our position at this time and at this place. It is not necessarily the way of the past, or the way of the future—and certainly not the way of everywhere” (Fauss 1982:2).

In 1982 Erika Bourguignon chaired The Ohio State University Task Force on the Excellence for Women (Fauss 1982:5). Under her direction, the Task Force asked: “What are the obstacles for gifted women students in obtaining the best possible education, the best possible training, the best possible intellectual development, the best possible chance at careers that they are capable of and for which they are willing to work.” Bourguignon described the goals of the Task Force “as promoting the excellence for women—with finding out what their needs are and attempting to provide a forum for airing some of their problems and for meeting some of these needs.” Echoing the encouragement that Bourguignon herself received from Powdermaker many years earlier, Bourguignon hoped that the Task Force would create a space within the University where there was agreement that “It is important to have women steered toward opportunities, to be told yes, you have the capacity” (Fauss 982:6).
In her Central States Anthropological Society Distinguished Lecture, which was given in 1987 but published in 1988, Bourguignon addressed questions central to the discipline about the future of anthropology by looking into the past at two of our intellectual founders—Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski. Commenting on the holistic perspective each adopted, she wrote that “Both Malinowski and Mead, then, see the anthropologist as a Jack-and-Jane of all trades, knowing enough about all kinds of things to be able to ask questions about them and report on their findings” (1988:81) (italics mine). “Jack-and-Jane”—both Mead and Malinowski endorsed holism, one of the key perspectives of the field. Rather than seeing women like Margaret Mead as marginal, as some certainly did and still do, Bourguignon drew parallels between Mead’s contributions, context, fieldwork, and public/practicing anthropology with that of Bronislaw Malinowski, a figure many saw as a giant in 20th century anthropology. Neither Mead nor Malinowski escaped criticism and reevaluation as anthropology moved in new directions in the late 20th century, but Bourguignon’s CSAS lecture reminded us that women played central roles in the discipline. As young women graduate students we knew we were entering a discipline in which women made important contributions. An effective mentor or role model may be perceived as someone who defines the space within the discipline for the mentee by drawing attention to those role models within the discipline that have preceded them.
Lerch took up the banner of teaching the ‘anthropology of women’ in her early teaching career, following the model provided by Bourguignon. However, by the early 1990s, the course content shifted away from a sole focus on women in anthropology to the anthropology of gender, which was intended to balance the presentation and to examine the social construction of male and female in a cross-cultural sample of societies. Books, articles, and films by women and about women still play a central role within the course. The women anthropologists of the past become part of the history of the field, presented as a way to anchor the study of gender in the earlier field of the anthropology of women and women’s studies. Lerch and her women colleagues initiated Women’s History Month, a Women’s Studies Minor, and a flourishing Women’s Center to provide the intellectual space for our women (and men) students.

Letters from the Field

Women in the field, doing ethnography, was also the subject of Bourguignon’s writings about the anthropology of women, the self and the behavioral environment, culture, objectivity and subjectivity. When she was interviewed about the anthropology of women, she remarked that “Anthropologists have been aware that the subjectivity of the researcher is an important factor in the collection and synthesis of data for some time, mainly because the primary instrument for gathering information in participant observation is the anthropologist’s self” (Fauss 1982:3). She
continued, “One’s access to information, to begin with, hinges directly on the way in which the researcher is perceived” (Fauss 1982:3). Picking up the same idea in her writings, she made it clear that the way the field researcher is perceived, that is race, gender, and age all make a difference in what people will tell you and what they allow you to see (Bourguignon 1986:13). For example, when I was in the field in Brazil, Bourguignon wrote to me saying “Having a room in a Brazilian household is a fine solution to your problems, economically as well as otherwise. An apartment of your own would have served to isolate you—this way you have a whole different area of contacts and observations open to you” (Letter from Bourguignon to Lerch, January 13, 1975). Ethnographers linguistic skills also serve as barriers to understanding so Bourguignon was also encouraged to hear that my Portuguese language was improving, but she advised “Your language problem may also be a good reason for wanting to record interviews so that you can play them back to make sure you understand everything that is said and to then double check by asking questions about what you already have on tape” (Letter from Bourguignon to Lerch, January 13, 1975). As fieldwork progressed, Erika’s letters offered greater guidance on question types, narrowing or broadening a field of focus, thinking ahead about how the dissertation might take shape, and usually beginning or ending with phrases like “your field notes are very interesting” or “I am delighted that things have really opened up for you now” or “I always enjoy your letters
and interesting notes and, as you can see, they prompt quite a few questions” (Letter from Bourguignon to Lerch, June 10, 1975). Midway through my field work my husband Al had to return to Columbus, Ohio, to resume his job as a school teacher. I wrote to Erika about this change, saying “Most of the responses to my role change have been one of curiosity, disbelief, and pity. The mediums look at me as though I have been abandoned by my husband. Some came up to me and hugged me out of pity, I guess” (Letter from Lerch to Bourguignon, June 7, 1975). In reference to my landlady, I wrote, “D.T. first treated me kindly, then tried to get more money out of me, and now she just laments the absence of Al” (Letter to Erika Bourguignon, June 7, 1975). In her ever encouraging and analytical way, Bourguignon responded, writing “I hope you are also keeping some sort of a personal diary, indicating the evolution of your own attitudes and feelings. This is important because clearly your work will be falling into two periods: before and after Al’s departure, and as you indicate, this has involved a change in your attitude toward interviews, etc. as well as, perhaps, a change in attitudes of others toward you. (I am reminded of the two periods of Berreman’s research, (with different interpreters) of which he makes so much in his analysis of field work” (Letter to Author, June 16, 1975).² To a lonely young woman, this contextualization of my role change

made me feel a little better as I recall. As a role model and mentor, a compass is being offered to the field worker, new at her role, struggling to find and to believe that she is on the right track. My memory is that letters from Erika Bourguignon were eagerly anticipated. After returning from the ‘field’ and beginning to write up my results, Erika provided the space and place within which I could publish my first paper on my research in the edited volume *A World of Women* where several young women anthropologists reported on their first field work among a variety of women in the societies of the world (Lerch 1980).

The mentoring relationship involves role modeling on the part of the student or young professional entering the field of her/his mentor. This relationship is complicated by hierarchy, ethnic background, age, and gender but when the student perceives that the professor is a role model, much learning and modeling can occur. More important, the professor or role model can open up spaces and places within the field to help make room for the student turning professional. Our relationship is based on the same gender, different ethnicity/religion (Jewish and WASP), different generation (pre-war and baby boomer), and same love of anthropology. A great mix!
References Cited

Bourguignon, Erika


1986 “Anthropology: Mirror and Compass.” A paper presented as part of the Graduate School 1986-87 Lecture Series, honoring the 50th anniversary of the Ohio State University Graduate School. Columbus: Ohio State University.


Cherneff, Jill B.R.


Crawford, Kijana and Danielle Smith


Fauss, Lynn


Lerch, Patricia Barker

1975 Letters (to Erika Bourguignon, June 7). Personal papers of Patricia Barker Lerch.

Powdermaker, Hortense


Kluckhohn, Clyde


Rich, Grant Jewell


Semeniuk, Alexandra and Alyson M. Worral


Trager, George L.


Wolf, Eric