# A Feminist Rumination on the Politics of Self-Disclosure

**An Invited Essay Submitted to *Family Science Review* for Review**

April L. Few-Demo

Editor's Note

This author invited essay is a response to the Hall and Mitchell manuscript, "Students' Preference and Perceptions Regarding Instructor Self-disclosure in the Classroom," which appeared in a recent issue of Family Science Review, (2014.19, (1), 56-75). The authors' findings indicate that Family and Child majors, as well as more conservative students, want less instructor self-disclosure and reported more negative perceptions of the instructor than non-Family and Child majors and more liberal classroom students. The authors discuss their content analysis of reasons students gave for their perceptions, and offer student sensitizing strategies for instructor self-disclosure. Few-Demo uses feminist theory and pedagogy to offer another lens for exploring the positive and negative benefits of instructor self-disclosure. As an appendix, Few-Demo shares her syllabus insert entitled "Classroom Etiquette & Creating a Safe."

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Hall and Mitchell (2014) conducted a study on student preferences and perceptions regarding instructor self-disclosure in the classroom. Overall and in general, they found that student expectations about instructors varied dramatically, student reasons for these expectations were diverse, and the type of disclosure (e.g., opinions on political issues, family-related issues, and personal details) in which instructors engaged influenced student preferences. Specifically, they provided us with a contemporary snapshot of *who* our students in the child development and family science discipline are by linking student characteristics to student preferences and perceptions. Their study indicated that child development and family science students tend to be more politically conservative than other undergraduate majors and less welcoming of instructor self-disclosure regarding policy and families. This particular finding poses a conundrum for instructors whose perceive their academic responsibility to be training students to become critical thinkers who are capable of deconstructing unearned privilege and the impact of historical social inequalities which have disproportionately disadvantaged certain families. This conundrum may be more keenly magnified for instructors who are identified by students as being members of a minority or marginalized group.

In their discussion, Hall and Mitchell (2014) recognized that instructor self-disclosure can create tenuous ground between instructors and students. Self-disclosure can be a dangerous activity for instructors (hooks, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). Instructors make conscious decisions about the extent of self-disclosure and students make judgments about instructor efficacy based on their perceptions of an instructor's political orientation and personal characteristics. Hall and Mitchell suggested several strategies for setting the stage for self-disclosure, including following Tobin's (2010) advice on self-disclosure; attending to one's *tone* when self-disclosing; and taking time to share with students one's teaching and learning philosophy at the beginning of a class and throughout the course as a means to sensitize students about instructor decision-making regarding self-disclosure. As a feminist African American family science scholar, my approach to thinking about the risks and benefits of instructor self-disclosure is slightly different than explanations offered by Hall and Mitchell. It is my intent not to critique Hall and Mitchell's article, but rather to engage in a critical discourse about instructor self-disclosure from an openly feminist perspective.

First, the context in which the study was conducted as well as the general context in which we inhabit as family science teachers, researchers, and practitioners are important microsystems to consider. This study was conducted with Millenials (i.e., those individuals birth born during the years ranging from the early 1980s to the early 2000s) in a region of the country, which has typically held politically conservative values toward family, gender, marriage, and the role of government for decades (Caraley, 2009; Jensen, 2006; Monson & Mertens, 2011; Walsh, 2009). Millenials are typically thought of having more liberal attitudes than previous age cohorts. However, it is worth noting the complexity of culturally conservative Millenials. For instance, a

Pew Research Report indicated that although Millennial Republicans have more liberal views than older Republicans on a number of issue dimensions, they nonetheless are more conservative than Democrats across age cohorts (Kiley & Dimock, 2014). Cultural or social conservatives tend to hold more traditional attitudes toward family and gender, be more religious, and view "small government" that is limited in its "intrusion" in people's lives as a goal (Busch, 2012; Caraley, 2009). Signatories of the Mount Vernon Statement (2010) defined social conservatism as one that values the central place of individual liberty and "informs conservatism's firm defense of family, neighborhood, community, and faith." Signatories included the leaders from politically conservative organizations such as the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America, Focus on the Family, and the Council for National Policy. Thus, faith and morality are tightly interwined with not only notions of what is moral government, but also notions of what constitutes healthy or "normal" individual and family development. Of course, there is variability and difference in how cultural and social values are held across racial and ethnic identities, religiosity, socioeconomic statuses, educational attainment, and residency (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural environs), even among the conservatively aligned. University students are products of their social ecologies; thus, the regional characteristics of a sample are important to consider. Students bring their life histories into the classroom and must contend with living biographies, in this case, instructors who may "proselytize" content that presents diverse social realities which run contrary to preconceived notions of family and development.

Typically, human development and family science (HDFS) departments tend to be composed of predominantly female undergraduate students who are seeking eventual employment in child-related (e.g., primary, secondary, and post-secondary education; childcare services), family-related (e.g., human services; social work; gerontology), and therapeutic-related (e.g., mental health; geriatrics; occupational and physical therapy; nursing) careers. In my own HDFS department, there are 651 female undergraduate (89.5%) and 76 male undergraduate (10.0%) of enrolled majors (N=727 students). Hagenbuch and Hamon (2011) found that undergraduate students who selected the discovery major of HDFS reported that they are drawn to HDFS because of the discipline's (1) treatment of family relationships, human sexuality, and family dynamics; (2) development of skills for parenting, marriage, and interpersonal communication; (3) ability to offer a unique perspective on people and families; and (4) potential for strengthening families. It could be argued that the cultural messages (e.g., cultural, linguistic, visual and non-verbal symbols and cues) that reflect and reward stereotypical heterosexual gender displays and familial domesticity are somewhat interrupted or at least challenged by a collegiate experience in HDFS. For example, most female HDFS undergraduate majors will experience a curriculum that is inclusive of diverse family forms, structures, and roles in varying contexts. These same students also are likely to be exposed to a curriculum that includes recent empirical work on family stress and resilience from an adaptation and strength-based perspective if those HDFS departments reflect current trends in the HDFS discipline. However, the same cannot be said of those HDFS students who pursue educational tracks or emphasis in child development and child life specialization where the curriculum may be more firmly rooted in developmental psychology, a discipline not known for feminist-oriented research or curricula. Thus, from this contextual perspective, it is not surprising that Hill and Mitchell (2014) found that the Family and Child students were the most conservative students, holding the least positive

perceptions about politically-oriented faculty disclosure, fearful feelings about toward perceived divergent views from the instructor, and discomfort in discussing controversial topics.

A second thought that came to mind after reading Hall and Mitchell's (2014) article was that social identities, the basis of unearned privilege and marginalization, matter. Race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of instructors and their students are meaningful interactions that must be considered in self-disclosure literature. Research has repeatedly indicated that students typically evaluate racial and ethnic minority faculty and LGBT faculty more harshly than White male faculty (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Williams, 2001). Given this body of literature, I am not sure that we should grant *the tone* in which a message is delivered matters as much as the extent to which students already perceive the authenticity, authority, and competency of the messenger to be (Few, Piercy, & Stremmel, 2007; Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). In my own self-reflexive article on the place of activist scholarship and feminist pedagogy in a co-taught family studies course with another African American professor, I documented evidence of both student resistance and student support as we challenged students to contemplate the politics of location (i.e., race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation) in their lives (Few, Piercy, & Stremmel, 2007). Using a Black feminist and critical race perspective, Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) described the complexities of being female faculty of color to examine and reflect on their classroom experiences with pre-service teachers. They found that "the students [were] often non-responsive and frequently resist[ed] the messenger, consequently, precipitately resisting the message" (p. 202); their observation indicated that students seemed to evaluate messages by instructors on the basis of those social identities embodied by the instructor (e.g., race and gender). Thus, they concluded that students seemed incapable of separating social justice messaging from the messenger.

Findings such as these further highlight the conundrum faced by those of us who wish to employ a feminist pedagogy which includes taps into the power of self-disclosure and the possibility of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004) noted that some racial and ethnic minority female faculty are faced with the conundrum of balancing the contention between their pedagogical beliefs and the actual dynamics of a classroom. Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004) stated:

> Women of color as feminist educators find themselves in this atmosphere of diffusive power relations—the land of cognitive dissonance, caught in the conflict between our feminist pedagogical theory and the reality of our prescribed place in the world. (p. 60)

Teaching about inclusivity and intersectionality is about "working the hyphens" while "working the centers and margins of self and "generalized other" (Fine, 1994). Teaching about inclusivity and intersectionality can be perceived by some students as proselytizing opinion rather than empirical research.  Teaching difference can be a tenuous and dangerous terrain to travel given the influence of student evaluations, specifically negative teaching evaluations which focus more on instructor personality than skill, on instructor promotion and tenure decisions (Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005).

A third consideration is that self-disclosure is a method for feminist transformational pedagogy. Transformational learning is about change and that the ability to promote and engender change via the interplay of power between student and teacher (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). A benefit of self-disclosure is that an instructor can create uncomfortable social and psychic spaces to help students recognize their own personal power and privilege in a larger ecology and become comfortable in discussing difference. bell hooks (1989) described a feminist classroom as both "a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice" and "where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university" (p. 51). For a feminist family studies instructor, the presentation of social inequalities or injustice using a neutral stance or tone is antithetical to feminist principles; for such a strategy may give the impression that inequalities that are real and salient in people's lives can be deemphasized or swept over in the curriculum. A feminist pedagogy involves an interactive style that encourages students to "claim their education" (Rich, 1979), to be active constructors of their own knowledge. Feminist pedagogy allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints and political orientations to be the center of analysis for a classroom. Safe or civil zones for collaborative dialogue (Webb, 2009) can be co-developed by instructors and students.

As a pedagogical practice to facilitate collaborative dialogue and to create safe zones with my students, I include two statements outlining my expectations for collaborative dialogue and civil communication in the classroom and virtual spaces (e.g., online course announcements, email correspondences) in all of my course syllabi (Please see Appendix A). These statements have been informed by resource sharing with my teaching mentors and colleagues over time, salient student interactions, and online resources. I consider these syllabus statements to be "works in progress" as my teaching methods and teaching contexts are continually changing over the years. To ensure that my students actually read these statements, I quiz my students on syllabus content within the second week of classes. Before the quiz, students are informed that they are responsible for knowing every section of the syllabus, with the exception of references and the letter grade scale. This practice encourages students to be accountable not only for learning course expectations, but also learning collaborative dialogue guidelines. Finally, in addition to these syllabus statements and the syllabus quiz, I include Virginia Tech's *Principles of Community*, a statement which was first endorsed by the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors in 2005 and affirms the university's commitment to a diverse and inclusive community. I believe that the inclusion of this statement in my syllabus communicates my own commitment to inclusivity and our communal status as members of the Virginia Tech community.

Collaborative dialogue fosters opportunities for creating what Tobin (2010) described as strategic self-disclosure. Webb's (2009) review on collaborative dialogue revealed multiple dimensions of the teacher's role in fostering beneficial group dialogue, including preparing students for collaborative work, forming groups, structuring the group-work task, and influencing student interaction through the instructor's discourse with small groups and with the class. The most common themes in collaborative dialogue research highlight the importance of providing students with opportunities for explaining their thinking and developing activities that promote student elaboration of ideas. Instructors can design activities that tap into the development of certain attitudes toward social inequalities and the position of social location. An

example of such an activity is the *Social Strata Awareness Inventory* (Allen, Floyd-Thomas, & Gillman, 2001).  Using this activity as a framework or guide for classroom discussion, instructors and students can determine the extent of self-disclosure through the practice of artful self-reflexivity.

Self-disclosure is a method in feminist transformational pedagogy that embraces self-reflexivity. The process of critical self-reflexivity, the personal application of critical thinking, is believed to be a necessary component of learning, especially in facilitating changes in personal beliefs and perspectives (Allen, 2000, 2009; Baber & Murray, 2001; Bailey, 2010; Enns, Sinacore, Ancis, & Phillips, 2004; Morgaine, 1994; Sharp, Bermudez, Watson, & Fitzpatrick, 2007). For instance, Brown (1993) identified the ability to be critically reflexive as a necessary tool in the profession of human ecology. Critical self-reflexivity allows students (and faculty) to examine the construction of personal meaning as it is informed by family, social and cultural environments (Allen, 2000). Allen (2000) argued that self-reflexivity helps us to question those meanings and biases that inhibit us from becoming authentic or self-fulfilling, but also helps our family science scholarship to be more comprehensive and authentic in representing the diversity of individual and family life. For those of us who identify as feminist HDFS faculty, we aspire to create opportunities for students to become "theorists of their own lives by interrogating and analyzing their own experience" (Weiler, 1991, p. 462). Using self-disclosure strategically, instructors not only have the opportunity to foster memorable content mastery by connecting theory and personal experience, but also student personal growth through self-awareness.

As an "out" feminist HDFS faculty member, I resonate with Hall and Mitchell's argument that students have an awareness of the instructor's power as well as their own. Educational settings such as the classroom are political spaces that both challenge and reproduce existing power dynamics within and across societies (Giroux, 1983). A feminist transformational pedagogy is critical pedagogy. Giroux (1994) defined critical pedagogy as pedagogy [that] signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities (p. 30). Critical pedagogy creates a discourse which constantly "illuminates the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power" (Giroux, 1994, p. 30).  Hall and Mitchell's (2014) discussion brings to mind that self-disclosure is also about perceived risk, a perceived risk by both instructors and students when it comes to authority and notions of peer solidarity. For instance, in a classic family studies pedagogical article, Allen (1988) noted that in classroom where topics about diversity was covered, student self-disclosure can result with a typical outcome in which students either are surprised to discover that a classmate with whom they had identified felt differently than they did about an issue or that a classmate with whom they had previously disagreed shared a similar perspective on a controversial topic. Such epiphanies can challenge students to deconstruct assumptions about "normative" peer beliefs and question socially constructed dichotomies informed by their life experiences. This type of peer confrontation is not necessarily experienced by students as negative or alienating, but as liberating and empowering. A critical pedagogy elicits these types of meaningful interaction and plants the seed for students to contemplate social change (hooks, 1994).

To self-disclose or not to self-disclose is a meaningful choice made by instructors and students during each class period. Hall and Mitchell's (2014) findings about student perceptions of instructor self-disclosure are supported by the extant literature. Although this article is not an argument against instructor self-disclosure, it is one that highlights risk. I endorse the feminist value of inclusivity, the critical examination of multiple perspectives and intersectionality, and measured self-disclosure. Strategic self-disclosure provides an opportunity for a pluralistic environment to be cultivated and modeled in and beyond the classroom. Contemporary HDFS students may be employed in professions where they will interact with individuals from diverse family arrangements (i.e., transnational family arrangements, LGBTQ-parent families, multiracial and multiethnic families, mixed orientation families, and LAT couple and family arrangements; see Lloyd, Few, & Allen, 2009) whose existence challenges family ideologies based on the *SNAF* (Standard North American Family) model (Smith, 1993). A feminist transformational pedagogy embraces a measured self-disclosure. This approach actively creates the potential for contemporary HDFS graduates to refine a critical professional skill—self-disclosure—and help them to build a rapport with their future clients and communities that is grounded with authenticity and empathy.

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## Appendix

*I have applied the following statements to my undergraduate and graduate course syllabi, specifically courses that cover content on gender, sexuality, intersectionality, and diversity.*

### "CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE & CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT"

In this class, students will be asked to critically evaluate and discuss diversity topics. Emotionally-driven feelings and diverse opinions across the personal and political spectrum are bound to pepper these discussions and often in unanticipated ways. To facilitate a productive and safe learning environment for each person, students must agree to respect one another in all interactions. When there is disagreement, students must agree to disagree in a respectful, civil way. All opinions and perspectives will be given voice in this class, but intentionally malicious, bigoted, or degrading comments will not be tolerated in this intellectual environment. A commitment to respect self and others is essential. Sensitive topics such as racial/ethnic and sexual orientation diversity and intimate violence will be examined. It is likely that there will be students who have experienced assault, domestic violence, or sexual identity confusion. Students may feel uncomfortable at times, and course topics may raise new questions for some students. **Controversial subject matter, however, cannot be used as an excuse to skip an assignment or give anyone permission to denigrate another student in the classroom or online on Scholar.** If any student has a serious reservation about a particular course topic, please inform Dr. Few-Demo. *(Please also read the section on Emailiquette, a guide for professional email correspondence with instructors.)*

### SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM "A NOTE ABOUT EMAILIQUETTE"

*Emailiquette* refers to etiquette or guidelines for effective e-mail correspondences.

**E-mail correspondences with the instructor in this class should be considered formal, similar to other business-style e-mail correspondence.** Your e-mail should address your instructor by title and name (Professor Few-Demo or Dr. Few-Demo). Therefore, a singular "Hi" or "Hey you" is an inappropriate greeting to any instructor. Please restrict your e-mail correspondence to issues of class business, course content-related suggestions for me to share with your peers, and questions that are not answered on the syllabus. Please use appropriate capitalization, spell out words completely, and sign your complete name.

**Do not flame or shout.** A flame is a searing e-mail message in which the sender attacks the recipient in overly harsh, and often personal, terms. It is the e-mail equivalent of verbal abuse. "Shouting" occurs when a student types full sentences, paragraphs, or an entire message in all capital letters. I do not respond to flames well because they are often inarticulate, indecipherable, and/or illogical. If you are agitated or stressed out about a matter, consider outlining what you wish to communicate and accomplish and wait for a couple of hours (or more) before sending an e-mail. In this way, a matter can be resolved efficiently, civilly, and fairly.