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### 'My Story Ain't Got Nothin To Do With You' or Does It?: Black Female Faculty's Critical Considerations of Mentoring White Female Students

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## 'My Story Ain't Got Nothin To Do With You' or Does It?: Black Female Faculty's Critical Considerations of Mentoring White Female Students

### Cover Page Footnote

1. In this study, we use "Black" to collectively describe the participants. In an open-ended question, all of the participants were asked to self-identify both their race and ethnicity. A variety of responses were provided, specifically in regard to ethnicity. The term "Black," however, was a consistent response from all participants. To learn more about the identification of each participant, we invite you to visit the participant profiles section of this paper. 2. Womanist was created by Alice Walker (1983). It is defined as a Black Feminist who appreciates women's culture, emotional flexibility, and strength. A womanist resists against hegemonic male culture and seeks ways to liberate womyn's voices and perspectives through scholarship and activism.

# “My Story Ain’t Got Nothin To Do With You” or Does It?: Black Female Faculty’s Critical Considerations of Mentoring White Female Students

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## Abstract

Previous literature on mentoring, specifically that of cross-cultural mentoring, has provided some insight into the intricacy of race in mentoring. However, much of this literature has focused on the mentoring relationship of a White individual mentoring a person of color. This qualitative inquiry critically explores the experiences of six Black female faculty who have mentored White female students in higher education graduate programs, focusing specifically on how they enter into these cross-cultural mentoring relationships. Using Black feminist thought, our findings suggest that while individual Black faculty may have unique experiences entering into mentoring relationships with White female students, a Black feminist standpoint does exist. These faculty members entered into the relationships cautiously and with thought, responding emotionally to the idea of mentoring White students, and screening the students, before formalizing the relationship via a student-centered approach. The findings from this study serve as a starting point in which to better understand faculty of color’s experiences mentoring White students as well as provide implications for both faculty and students who may enter into such a relationship.

## Keywords

faculty—student relationships, gender, mentoring, race

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Scholars have written extensively about mentoring within an educational context (Busch, 1985; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Parks, 2000; Patton, 2009; Patton & Harper, 2003; Sanford, 1967; Stewart, 2007). Previous scholarship has helped to frame the significance of mentoring within education, describing it as “the most important variable related to academic and career success” (Boyle & Boice, 1998, p. 90) and “one of the most salient factors in academic and career success” (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 67). Subsequently, there has been a lack of attention devoted to the experiences of the faculty member as a mentor (Griffin, 2012) as well as the complex role of social identities within mentoring relationships (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002, 2004). Traditional definitions of mentoring focused primarily on specific practices associated with mentoring, often highlighting the benefits to the mentee (i.e., student) while neglecting the social identities of the individuals involved in the mentoring relationship (Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, & Rouner, 1989). The extent to which identity may be discussed in these definitions is often relegated to difference in age or experience (i.e., senior person and junior person) and then normalized without acknowledging any differences that may exist as a result of social stratification.

When social identities such as race and gender are acknowledged and centered within mentoring, definitions of mentoring become much more intricate. Given that certain identities in the United States are privileged while others are oppressed, the complexity of defining mentoring is further amplified when social identities differ among faculty and students involved in the mentoring relationship. Thus, as higher education has become a more diverse institution in regard to social identities, traditional definitions have become less reflective of mentoring relationships within an educational context.

For the purpose of this study, we draw on concepts associated with cross-cultural mentoring that identify mentoring as a relationship between individuals of different cultures and/or races. Thus far, cross-cultural mentoring

has focused primarily on a specific type of racial relationship—that of an individual from a dominant racial/cultural group (i.e., White person) mentoring an individual from a non-dominant racial/cultural group (i.e., person of color) (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002, 2004). A challenge with framing mentoring in this manner, specifically within the context of faculty/student relationships, is that, similar to traditional definitions of mentoring, it does not acknowledge the racial diversity of faculty working in higher education today. In other words, if we continue to assume the mentor to be White then we continue to neglect the presence of faculty of color in the academy and the fact that they can be and are, as this study illustrates, mentors to White students.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black female faculty in departments of higher education who mentor White female students, focusing specifically on how these mentors define and enter into these mentoring relationships. By doing this, we intentionally challenge the normative ways in which cross-cultural mentoring is traditionally framed and raise awareness of the complexity of mentoring as it relates to race and gender. The following are our guiding research questions: (1) How do Black female faculty in higher education programs define mentoring? (2) How do Black female faculty enter into mentoring relationships with White female students in higher education programs?

As individuals who both pursued graduate minors in women’s studies, we are most interested in faculty/student relationships situated specifically between women. Additionally, instead of focusing broadly on women of color, we chose to focus on relationships between Black and White women. We did this for three reasons. First, when scholars study “people of color,” or “Women of color,” the intention is to display a level of inclusivity of marginalized populations—those whose experiences are often not illustrated in academic scholarship. We acknowledge that centering the experiences of racialized people is critical;

however, people of color is an extremely broad term that does not capture the experiences of all racialized women and risks essentializing of the voices of women of color (Wing, 2003).

Second, the historical relationship between Black and White women in the United States is substantively different from relationships between White women and women of other races. The vast majority of Black women were brought to the United States to work as slaves, embedded in a system of oppression (Collins, 2000), in which they were owned by White men but often worked for White women, especially within the home. Patriarchy and racism continue to shape and influence relationships between White and Black women today. "Put in simple terms, male privilege positions the nature of womanhood, while White privilege through history positions a White woman's reality as the universal norm of womanhood, leaving [Black] women defined by two layers of oppression" (Accapadi, 2007, p. 209)—racism and sexism.

The third reason for studying relationships between Black and White women is that we, ourselves, self-identify as a White woman and a Black woman. Our own experiences as mentors and mentees have been shaped by our gendered and racialized identities and the various ways in which race and racism have been acknowledged within these relationships. We posit that our own experiences are counter to the ways in which mentoring is often discussed, and thus, we bring these gendered and racialized experiences to this study as critical feminist scholars.

## Literature Review

Cross-cultural mentoring is defined as a mentoring relationship that involves individuals from two different cultures (Kalbfleish & Keyton, 1995; Barker, 2007). Although culture can be broadly defined, much of the cross-cultural literature has centered racial identity, positing that race and culture are often intricately linked. As a result, scholars who study cross-cultural mentoring have gone beyond traditional definitions, acknowledging

the role of personal identities and critically examining the role of race in mentoring relationships (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Lee, 1999; Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Frierson, Hargrove, & Lewis, 1994; Guiffrida, 2005; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002, Stanley & Lincoln, 2005).

What they present, however, is conflicting information. Some researchers (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Lee, 1999) found that the race of the mentor was not a factor in the mentoring relationship and that it was the quality of the relationship that was most important. Conversely, other scholars found that race did matter, both in seeking and developing mentoring relationships (Frierson, Hargrove, & Lewis, 1994; Guiffrida, 2005). Frierson, Hargrove, and Lewis (1994) found that Black students paired with Black mentors reported more positive academic interactions than Black students paired with White mentors. Additionally, Guiffrida (2005) found that Black students sought the guidance of Black faculty over White faculty. While these findings demonstrated the complexity of race in mentoring relationships, they also highlight the normative way in which cross-cultural mentoring has been studied. Much of the cross-cultural mentoring scholarship has focused on White individuals mentoring people of color (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002, 2004). Additionally, within a higher education context, the literature has focused primarily on mentoring between senior and junior faculty (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005; Dolan, 2007) and not between professors and students.

One such example is Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's (2004) autoethnography that examined the mentoring relationship of a senior White male faculty and a junior Black female faculty. They identified six different components integral to a cross-cultural mentoring relationship, including the establishment of trust, open dialogue regarding racism, an understanding of the juxtaposed world in which faculty of color reside, recognition of the existence of a power dynamic due to difference in race and

possibly other identities, acknowledgment of the paternalistic nature of the relationship, and reciprocal perception of mentor and mentee as individuals and not representatives of their racialized communities.

Similar to Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004), Fassinger's (1997) feminist model of mentoring also focused on the benefits experienced by both the mentor and the mentee. One of the more progressive models of mentoring, Fassinger's (1997) model highlighted the relational component of mentoring, emphasized issues related to power, and identified diversity (i.e., difference in social identities) as a significant aspect of the mentoring relationship. Fassinger's model was later revised by Benishek, Bieschke, Park, and Slattery (2004), who focused specifically on the way in which diversity was framed within the model. While Fassinger conceptualized diversity as a component of the model, Benishek et al. (2004) posited that diversity should be infused throughout the model and not viewed as a separate tenet. Their result was a multicultural feminist model of mentoring.

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's (2004) autoethnography along with Fassinger's (1997) feminist model of mentoring and Benishek, Bieschke, Park, and Slattery's (2004) multicultural feminist model of mentoring are important contributions to the scholarship on cross-cultural mentoring. While these scholars have provided an understanding of how race can shape mentoring relationships, their research also works from an assumption that mentors are typically from dominant identity groups and mentees from minoritized identity groups. Using Black feminist thought (BFT) as a theoretical framework, the current study allows for the exploration of cross-cultural mentoring from a different vantage point, centering the Black female mentor's perspective and her process of entering into a mentoring relationship with a White female student.

### Theoretical Framework

When exploring scholarship on feminist mentoring, traditionally gender is centered

and, when race is discussed, there is an assumption that the mentor is White (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Fassinger, 1997). Black feminist thought provided much of the foundation for the expansion of feminism (Collins, 2000). Additionally, BFT disrupted the dominant discourse within feminism, which historically perpetuated a monolithic White voice, neglecting the differences that exist among women of difference races. "Black feminist thought originate[d] within Black women's communities," (Collins, 2000, p. 41) and captured not only a feminist perspective, but clearly distinguished between the experiences of White women and Black women. Black Feminist thought allows for the centering of Black women's lived experiences while acknowledging that every Black woman may not have the same experience, albeit a Black women's collective standpoint does exist (Collins, 2000). There are many features of BFT, and this study specifically focused on consciousness as a form of freedom.

Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) theorizes that Black women view relationships with one another as safe spaces—as places to deeply listen to one another. Although these spaces "rely on exclusionary practices, their overall purpose most certainly aims for a more inclusionary, just society" (Collins, 2000, p. 121). Safe spaces also developed through music (i.e., Black women's blues traditions) and Black women's writings. It is through these safe spaces that Black women "could construct ideas and experiences that infused daily life with new meaning. These new meanings offered African-American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood" (Collins, 2000, p. 123). This new meaning became "four ideas about consciousness—the importance of self-definition, the significance of self-valuation and respect, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment" (Collins, 2000, p. 131).

Collins (2000) spoke to how Black women's consciousness has been influenced by Black women's blues, so we chose to define

each consciousness using a music analogy. Self-definition is the ability for Black women to reject external stereotypical images and ideas of Black womanhood and define who they are for themselves (Collins, 2000). This consciousness could be viewed as the recognition that there is music playing in your head about your life, who you can be, and who you should be. Self-valuation is Black women's ability to challenge ideologies of domination (i.e., racism and sexism), build up their own self-esteem, and demand the respect of others (Collins, 2000). It is the Black women's awareness of the content of the music that is being played over and over in their head. "African-American women have 'possessed the spirit of independence,' have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood" (as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 128); thus, self-reliance and independence are the ability for Black women to own the record player that is playing the music she picked out for herself. It is through their awareness of self-defining, self-valuation, and self-reliance that Black women are then self-empowered to change their lives, their family, and their community. Collins (2000) shares, "No matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self" (p. 130). It is through these four ideas of consciousness that we explored how Black female faculty define, understand, and enter into mentoring relationships with White female students.

### Researchers' Assumptions

We came to this study via our own mentoring and educational experiences. We share these views and experiences with our readers to provide context and share our positionality as it relates to this study.

#### Kathleen's Story

During the first few weeks of my doctoral program, I learned that my advisor would be retiring at the end of the year. As a result, I spent much of my first semester of doctoral study searching for a faculty member to serve not just as an advisor but also as a mentor.

As I met with various faculty members in my department, they in turn, encouraged me to speak with the students for whom they served as their advisor. In talking with students, I discovered that within many of these faculty/student relationships (some of which the students actually defined as "mentoring") existed a critical dynamic related to race in that the faculty member was a person of color and the student, White. As I proceeded on my own journey to find a mentor, I found that many of the faculty, who shared not only my research interests but also my values, were women of color. As a White woman, this awareness compelled me to look further and more critically at the idea of mentoring between faculty of color and White students. Encouraged by a professor to seek a co-investigator for this study, I asked Lissa, my classmate and a Black womanist scholar to join me on this journey. As a Black womanist scholar, her voice is critical to the construction of this scholarship as she challenges dominant ideologies, including my own thoughts related to race.

#### Lissa's Story

As a first generation Black female college student, I have had to seek out mentorship throughout my entire academic career. As I entered my PhD program, I knew finding support and guidance would be key to my success in the program. In the past, most of my strong mentors had been women who worked in student affairs, but I was now trying to connect with faculty, which was a new experience for me. I began reaching out to specific faculty and asking for what I needed. There were times I could not always articulate the type of relationship I was looking for, nor did I know how to cultivate what I considered necessary. Frustrated, but hopeful to find what I needed, I was intrigued by Kathleen's offer to work with her to study mentorship. We were able to think through the process of finding a mentor, successfully establishing a relationship and understanding of how mentorship seemed to work from the inside out with Black female faculty and White female students. It is through this mentoring research study and time talking with Black

female faculty that I have acquired my own definition of mentorship.

## Methodology

Just as our theoretical framework allowed us to center the lived experiences of Black women, it was essential that the methodology we employed also centered research about women. Feminist phenomenology was used to guide this study as it provided for the centering of women's voices while exploring the essence of their lived experiences in relation to the phenomena—race, gender, and mentoring. Phenomenology is the study of essences within the lived experience from a retrospective perspective (Van Manen, 1997). Feminism informed this phenomenological study in that we explored the essence of the women's lived mentoring experiences using feminist values to inform and investigate the phenomenon. There is no one specific way to define or conduct feminist phenomenology. However, there are common goals that feminist scholars strive for within feminist methodology, and these goals have informed this study. First, DeVault (1996) states that feminist methodology should embrace a scholarly shift from focusing on the experiences of men to centering the experiences of all women. The hope is that this study does not just add a women's centered perspective to the literature but generates conversation, awareness, and understanding of how Black women may experience mentoring relationships differently, which is key to feminist work (Sprague, 2005).

Second, DeVault (1996) claimed those employing feminist methodology should be intimately concerned with social change for all women, stating that criterion for this goal could include changing theory, introducing new topics to a discipline, consciousness raising, or decolonizing of research and/or practice. We employed feminist methodology by centering women's lived experiences and challenging traditional and normative ideas related to mentoring. Third, intersectionality is an important key to using a feminist methodology. DeVault (1996) stated, "The

aim of much feminist research has been to 'bring women in,' that is, to find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, and to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives" (p. 32). The diversity of women includes multiple identities, experiences, life stories, and perspectives. This study focused on the impact race and gender has on mentoring relationships within higher education.

Last, feminist methodology embodies the belief that research is co-constructed with participants and that it is not possible for us to separate ourselves from the study (Prasad, 2005). It is about engaging in more personal and reciprocal relationships with participants and intentionally seeking to eliminate harm from the research process (DeVault, 1996). Bloom (1998) states, "Feminist methodology seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched" (p. 1). We not only worked to minimize harm by building intentional and authentic relationships with the participants over time but actively participated in the co-construction process.

## Recruitment of Participants

We informally recruited Black female faculty for this study through various interactions at the 2011 conference for the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). One week later, we emailed each woman a formal letter requesting her participation. Of the eight women we contacted, six responded and confirmed participation in the study. The six participants self-identified as Black female faculty and were either tenured or in a tenure track position within departments of higher education or educational leadership. Additionally, all participants had at least one experience, either past or present, of mentoring a White female student as a faculty member.

## Data Collection

After obtaining IRB approval, we collected data from December 2011 to February 2012. The first set of interviews took place one to



four weeks after the women confirmed participation in the study and focused on the initial relationship building. Feminist phenomenology is less concerned with utilizing a specific method and instead focuses on centering the lived experiences of women and reciprocity between the researcher and participants (Bloom, 1998; DeVault, 1996). Thus, the initial relationship-building meeting was an essential first step in our data collection process. We used the video calling software Skype during the initial interview, as we thought a face-to-face conversation would be more personable and aid us in building trust (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). The conversations lasted 60 minutes. Due to the informal nature of the interviews, we did not record them but instead took copious hand notes. We took the time to engage with each participant on a personal level, asking them to narrate their journey to the professoriate while we shared our journey to graduate school and how we came to study mentoring. We also provided time for the participants to ask any clarifying questions related to the study. Building and developing relationships with participants is essential to feminist methodologies (Bloom, 1998; Sprague, 2005). Thus, the interviews were structured in a way that allowed us to get to know the participants and the participants to get to know us as critical researchers.

The second set of interviews took place three to four weeks after the initial interview. The interviews were semi-structured and the questions were divided into three general areas: mentoring experience, mentoring White women, and race and gender in mentoring. Interviews ranged between 60 and 110 minutes in length. We used Skype again, and the video recording software, Pamela, as the mediums to conduct and record the interviews. Seeing and hearing the participants aided in our ability to remain focused and attentive during the interviews as well as develop stronger relationships with these women (Bloom, 1998).

### **Data Analysis and Quality Criteria**

We collaboratively analyzed our data using

cross-case analysis method. This method allowed us to see how the women's stories unfolded, to compare and contrast within and across the stories, as well as offered us an opportunity to see common experiences and outlying thoughts and opinions (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Once the interviews were completed, we transcribed them verbatim, reviewed our notes, read the transcribed interviews numerous times, and coded broadly for themes that emerged from the data (Patton, 2002). In addition, while coding, we often went back to listen to the actual recordings of the interviews and used process-tracing (i.e., displaying the initial themes that emerged from each woman's story on large butcher paper) to see differences and similarities across and within the women (Patton, 2002). Khan and VanWynsberghe (2008) stated, "Cross-case analysis enables researchers to delineate the combination of factors that may have contributed to the outcomes" (Cross-case analysis, para. 2); thus, using our theoretical framework as the lens through which to make meaning of the factors contributing to the women's experiences and to seek greater and deeper understanding, we transitioned to focused coding. Lastly, process-tracing methods typically result in the writing of detailed narrative (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). This process resulted in our co-constructed and artistic vignette of our participants' definition of mentoring.

It is important to understand that given our feminist framework, we viewed the participants as co-creators of knowledge within this project. Although there are multiple truths, it was important to measure the quality of the study on its authenticity because we, as researchers, wanted to ensure that we captured the essence of mentoring as it related to the women we interviewed. Authenticity has five criteria: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003). Fairness, the consideration of the participants' multiple perspectives, and tactical authenticity, the empowerment of participants to act because of their participation, was addressed through

member checks (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003). Participants provided us with feedback about the accuracy of our transcriptions and data analysis (Maxwell, 2003) as well as new insights that arose after the interviews.

Catalytic authenticity, the degree to which the study promotes action (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003; Rodwell, 1998), was addressed through the implications for praxis in this paper as well as sharing the finding from this study to improve two mentoring programs in which we were affiliated. Maintaining a research journal and documenting changes within the participants and ourselves is one way we addressed ontological authenticity, which is how the participants and researchers matured and expanded consciousness about a phenomenon (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003; Rodwell, 1998). Lastly, educative authenticity, which is the participants and researchers ability to understand and respect how others make meaning of a phenomenon (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003; Rodwell, 1998), was addressed through facilitating a respectful research process including going over our consent forms as well as addressing questions participants had about the process. Our participants also served as peer debriefers, in which we sat down over a meal and discussed the findings.

## Findings

Black feminist thought was utilized as the primary framework for this study, centering the notion of consciousness as a form of freedom. The findings from this study answered the following research questions through the lens of BFT: (1) How do Black female faculty in higher education programs define mentoring? (2) How do Black female faculty enter into mentoring relationships with White female students in higher education graduate programs?

The women in our study graciously shared their uncertainty as they pondered what it meant to be a Black female mentor, and more specifically, what it meant to enter into mentoring relationships with White female students.

To provide additional context, we have included brief profiles that share a little about each participant, as well as our relationship to the participants. The pseudonyms were chosen by the participants.

**Imani**, quiet and laid back during our first meeting over Skype, closed her door and pulled her chair closer to her desk to talk with us. She was a full professor, enjoying her sabbatical at the time of our interviews. She successfully navigated a challenging journey to the professorate earning the respect of her colleagues as she advanced professionally. She shared with us her deep commitment to her community, specifically the church and the neighborhood in which she grew up. Although Imani self-identified as Black, she labeled that her social identity. Her race, she explained, was human while her ethnicity was African American.

Lissa met **Rachel** at a conference roundtable session that focused on the experiences of Black women within the academy. Rachel, an assistant professor at a southern university, kept a busy schedule with teaching and writing. A practitioner at heart, she made the transition to faculty because of her love for teaching and scholarship. Rachel self-identified as Black or African American.

Originally from the East coast, **Eliza's** education started in Catholic and private schools. As an associate professor, she found herself dividing her time between family and writing. Becoming a full professor was next on her list of career goals. She exuded positive energy, and we found her laugh contagious. Uncomfortable with the label mentor, she preferred to be called teacher or advisor or guide. She was always open to teaching and supporting us through a quick text, over lunch in our home state, or breakfasts at a conference. Eliza self-identified as Black and African American Plus. She shared that her ethnicity was predominantly African American but inclusive of other ethnicities as well.

An assistant professor originally from the west coast, **Vanessa** and Kathleen met at a national

conference when Kathleen attended her paper session. As a scholar who also studies mentoring, Vanessa's advice and questions to us were thoughtful and specific. Her upbringing in a predominantly White community influenced her perspectives with mentoring White women. She was conscious and aware of her interactions and mentoring style with students as she has had strong mentorship in her academic career from which to draw. Vanessa self-identified as Black and African/Caribbean American.

Passionate about the arts, **Mahogany**, a full professor, fills her time with family, writing, teaching, and contributing to many professional organizations. Always open to a Skype mentoring date with us, she passes on her wisdom through metaphors and storytelling. She was the only person who talked about the role of male mentorship in her life, which offered an interesting perspective to our research.

As a cosmopolitan faculty member, **Whitney** was always on the go. This made scheduling our conversations challenging at times. She always has a writing project in progress and new ideas in her head. We often caught up with her at conferences for lunch or coffee. She is our 30-minute mentor as she offers advice, encouragement, and (sometimes) helpful scolding each time we run into her. Whitney self-identified as Black and African American.

Although not all the Black female faculty had the same experiences, feelings, or ideas about mentoring White women, they did have a collective experience, or Black feminist standpoint in regard to mentoring White female students. This standpoint manifested itself into a collective co-constructed definition of mentoring, their initial response to the idea of mentoring a White women, a screening process to help decide whether to enter into a closer relationship, and the formalization of the relationship itself.

### Co-constructed Definition of Mentoring

Acknowledging the feminist practices and informed by BFT (Collins, 2000), we co-constructed a composite definition of mentoring

with our participants from their own spoken words. Instead of allowing normative and dominant definitions to frame this study, we recognized our participants as possessing and sharing knowledge essential to the tenets of mentoring. Each woman spoke of mentoring from their Black female perspective and, in turn, helped us to understand the unique dynamics and characteristics of cross-cultural mentoring when the faculty member is a Black woman and the student is a White female. By remaining true to both our feminist framework and methodology, we acknowledged and centered both the lived experiences, as well as the scholarly expertise of these faculty women.

**"You call me mentor, and I...**

**I get uncomfortable...I am not a mentor—I am a teacher, guide, advisor. I try to forget about the title...to focus on the relationship, the emotions, the actions...**

**I \*pause\*...**

**I choose you?**

**I check my ego at the door. Today, I am your Jack Nicholson with floor side seats. Tomorrow, I might be in the bleachers. Either way, I cheer for you.**

**I nurture you...I value you...I lift you up... because that is what I do as a Black woman.**

**You call me...**

**to teach you, guide you...so I share with you...the secrets**

**passed down to me from my teachers, my elder sisters, my academic mothers.**

**And, although you may not know it, I learn from you."**

In this co-constructed definition, the participants highlighted four ideas that were central to their understanding of mentoring. First, the participants shared that the title of mentor was not as important as the actual mentoring relationship. In other words, they conceptualized mentoring as active rather than passive, focusing on how they mentor rather than being a mentor. Second, and similar to the ideas presented in previous definitions of cross-cultural mentoring (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Fassinger, 1997; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004;), the participants noted that the mentoring relationship needed

to be reciprocal. In other words, both the mentor and mentee were responsible for and subsequently recipients of any learning that could occur within the relationship. Third, the participants focused on growth rather than replication. While the participants acknowledged the importance of reciprocity in the relationship, they also comprehended that they possessed different skills and knowledge as a result of their position in the academy and that they could share these skills and knowledge with their mentee. However, their intention in sharing their skills and/or knowledge was not to replicate themselves in their mentees but rather to help their mentees grow and develop their own identities as scholars and professionals.

The fourth idea embedded in this co-constructed definition of mentoring, and the impetus for our second research question, was the questioning by Black female faculty members as to whether they could, should, or wanted to mentor White female students. While all of the participants had served as a mentor to at least one White female student, they shared that entering into such a relationship was a contemplative process, requiring them to use their conscientiousness to discern their feelings surrounding a mentoring relationship with a White woman, question whether they could enter into such a relationship, and finally decide how they wanted to formalize the cross-cultural mentoring relationship.

### Initial Reactions

While the participants reacted differently to the idea of entering into a mentoring relationship with a White female student, the Black feminist standpoint was to pause—to literally stop, reflect, and feel. While pausing, some participants shared feelings of surprise, some talked about suspicion, while still others questioned students' motivation. Vanessa's pause was one of surprise, stating, "I don't think that White students seek me out in that way or don't connect with me in that way unless the door might be opened through us being, you know, in an advising match for some particu-

lar reason."

Eliza reflected on internal thoughts when a White female student first inquired about starting a mentoring relationship with her:

Well, [laughter] usually my initial response is suspicion and initially this sense of ... "My story ain't got nothin to do with you" because I have this different or additional hurdle of racism that impacts my story that isn't relevant for you...so you know, you aren't going to have a parallel path [laughter]...

Eliza elaborated on her feelings of suspicion, explaining that it comes from two different places:

I'm not convinced that initially our lives are parallel enough that my experiences would be relevant to a woman who is White... but the other place it comes from is that initial feeling out of that woman. What have you done or still need to do around your own internalized dominance as a White person? Do you really understand the relationship you're trying to enter into here with me on this level given the ways race and racism impact both of our lives differently and are going to impact this relationship at some point?

Previous scholars have suggested that those involved in cross-cultural mentoring relationships need to comprehend the ways in which race and racism may impact their daily lives (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Fassinger, 1997; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). Similarly, Eliza highlighted the importance of both participants acknowledging how race and racism might impact the mentoring relationship. However, unlike the previous scholarship, the findings from this study highlight that the individual who may have to do more work around their understanding of race, racism, and privilege is the mentee, not the mentor. Eliza's response illustrated why a mentoring relationship between a Black woman and a White woman might not be viewed as natural or within the framework of BFT as a safe space (Collins, 2000). Eliza was conscious of self-valuation as she challenged

if the student had considered how issues of domination may play out in the relationship and how their needs may not be the same because the student is White. A Black mentor may question what knowledge related to survival she would pass down to a White woman. Additionally, she may question whether she should be charged with affirming a White woman's existence. This is an important finding given that the participants acknowledged the centrality of reciprocity in a mentoring relationship.

Whitney talked about how she had not always found White people in general to be very trusting and often questioned their motivation. She shared her internal thoughts and actions:

I have some White students who clearly expressed an interest in working with me, but I'm not sure it is working for me as much as it is working for Whitney. The things they can gain from it. So I'm not sure... bottom line...I question motives.

This questioning of motives comes from a consciousness of self-reliance (Collins, 2000). Whitney is a well-respected Black female scholar and through the support of other Black female mentors has navigated the ranks of tenure and the world of publishing giving her a distinguished academic reputation. This reputation gives her a spirit of independence and respect to which White female students may be drawn. She is aware of this and questions students' genuineness to work with her. It is important to recognize that this healthy paranoia is a product of racism, White privilege, and White domination. It comes from a history of White people exploiting Black people and taking credit for their work, ideas, and talent (Collins, 2000).

### Screening

After acknowledging their initial feelings about entering into a mentoring relationship with a White female student, the Black feminist standpoint moved from pause to screening. The process of screening, included faculty deciding with whom they had time and energy to work as well as if the White fe-

male student had an understanding of racism, White privilege, and/or a desire to engage collaboratively in social justice and equity scholarship. The screening process was subtle in some cases while other participants were direct about the women in which they were willing to work.

Whitney talked clearly about the need for authenticity with any White women she mentored particularly around issues of race:

I am more inclined to mentor a White student where I feel comfortable enough to say to them, "Today I am really having trouble with White people...I don't like them today"...and it could be understood as a moment...that I don't hate White people...that I don't have larger issues that might be perceived by me saying a comment like that.

This line of thinking during Whitney's screening process is to determine the potential and capacity of a mentoring relationship with a White female student becoming untraditional safe space. Black female faculty are a part of an institutional structure that is influenced and impacted by racism and sexism. Within a consciousness of self-empowerment, Collins (2000) stated, "The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence with language, eventually moves her to the action of talking with others. Other women talk themselves free" (p. 129). Collins' (2000) definition of safe space and freeing oneself from the inside out, tells us that Black women are typically most comfortable talking through issues of oppression and struggle with other Black women and not necessarily White women. When a Black female faculty member is deciding to enter into a more personal and close relationship with a White female student, she must be able to be authentic which includes being honest about her feelings and experiences with race and racism.

The consciousness of self-definition was observed when Vanessa spoke unapologetically about not working with White female students who did not believe or live a life in line with her social justice values:

I would say going to a graduate program

where almost everybody was doing research around some form of equity or justice kind of empowered me to do that type of work as well. I don't know that I would have as much tolerance for a student who maybe wanted to work with me but didn't support that kind of work or didn't express an interest in that kind of work. Um, and I am not shy about saying those things.

Her unapologetic mindset of placing herself and her values around equity scholarship in the center of her decision-making process to mentor or not mentor a White female student is telling of her consciousness of self-definition. Collins (2000) affirmed, "placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships... self-definition becomes essential to survival" (p. 123). Vanessa defined what is important to her as a Black female scholar, and her ability to self-define has led to a way of thinking, discerning, and potential action regarding who she is and who she is willing to mentor.

Similar to Vanessa, Mahogany's screening process also involved searching for a shared commonality. She found that she was most likely to enter into cross-cultural mentoring relationships with White female students who at least had an understanding of privilege and oppression as it relates to gender.

There is a commonality because as women we have a base level of understanding issues around male privilege. The women I have worked closely with are those that are not just familiar with, but understand male privilege and also multiple privileges... These folks get it... they understand multiple forms of oppression and marginalization.

In discussing patriarchy and oppression, Collins (2000) referenced John Gwaltney's (1980) interview with Nancy White, (at the time) a 73-year old Black woman. White explained that both White and Black women experience oppression via patriarchy (albeit to varying degrees). Both groups are objectified (although differently) and images function to dehumanize and control both groups. Mahogany's discussion of her own mentoring

relationship within the context of a shared understanding of male privilege may begin to explain why Black women and White women could consider themselves as possible mentors/mentees.

### Formalizing the Relationship

After processing initial feelings and reactions and screening the student, the Black feminist standpoint acknowledged that these spaces with White women could be safe (enough) spaces. In other words, these relationships did not resemble the safe spaces that the Black faculty had previously encountered with other Black women, but through the screening process, these relationships were acknowledged to be safe enough to enter into a more formal and personal mentoring relationship. This is an important finding because of the ways in which racism and White privilege have played out amongst Black and White women and was consequently the original purpose of safe spaces for Black women. Although safe spaces were not intended to be exclusionary (Collins, 2000), historically, this was required for Black women's survival. We found that once the mentors were willing to formalize these mentoring relationships, they viewed them as safe enough spaces. This is also important given that Collins (2000) highlighted that while safe spaces had traditionally been understood as Black-only spaces, the intention of these spaces was to create a more inclusionary, just society.

For one participant, Imani, you can see the shift in her comfort, and ultimately the relationship, by her willingness to allow students access to her professional and personal life. She felt strongly that mentoring had to be both personal and professional. She shared that "Mentoring is a genuine friendship and if it is only professional then it is artificial." For some faculty, the formalization of the mentoring relationship occurred through shared work that centered the student's experience but also provided opportunities for faculty development. Rachel shared that her relationship with a White student was formalized through a shared research experience:

I was actually looking for a research assistant, and she wanted a research opportunity. She didn't have a graduate assistantship, so she interviewed with me, and um, I liked her skills. I thought we would be able to work well together. And from there, we started working on my work and research...the best way to get my attention is to work with me on something...whether it be a book chapter or TA'ing a class...it allows a student to learn, and you know, for me to do my heavy-handed mentoring thing and making sure they are learning all of the skills they need to be good researchers and good scholars. I am getting things that I need to get done completed, and you know, it kind of opens the door to that more personal relationship.

Yet, for others, the formalization of the relationship was done through an official naming process, initiated by the mentee at the encouragement of the mentor. In other words, the mentors indicated that they would not formally identify a student as their mentee unless that student considered the faculty member to be their mentor. In reflecting on the formation of her mentoring relationship with a White female student, Vanessa recalled an interaction between herself and Kathleen, ...when you, Kathleen, invited me at ASHE to participate in this study, you asked, "Is this student your mentee?" And I was like, "well you have to ask her"...Because I think it's really a mutual thing. So, I would describe her as one of my mentees, but it would require her to say also, "Yes, she's my mentor." She would have to choose me, and I would have to choose her.

Through their initial reaction and screening process, our analysis showed that the participants possessed various consciousnesses (i.e., self-definition, self-valuation, self-reliance, and self-empowerment) that led to a shift in their feelings about the White female student. Ultimately, the participants experienced a safe enough space that a formal mentoring relationship was able to develop.

## Discussion and Implications

Both the theoretical framework and the findings from this study provide important implications for future research and praxis related to cross-cultural mentoring. While previous studies on cross-cultural mentoring have interrogated race, they have primarily assumed the mentor to be White and the mentee to be a person of color. This study challenged traditional notions of cross-cultural mentoring by centering the experiences of Black female faculty who mentor White female students, culminating in a Black feminist standpoint that illustrates the complexity of entering into such relationships. Within cross-cultural mentoring, there has been a natural tendency to assume that the mentor is of a dominant identity and the mentee of a marginalized identity. As institutions of higher education become more diverse, specifically in regard to faculty, future research could explore how other women of color in the academy such as Latin American Women, Asian American women, or Native American women enter into mentoring relationships with White female students. Research could also explore other educational settings in which mentoring may take place, such as between student affairs practitioners and undergraduate college students. By continuing to center the experiences of people of color as mentors in cross-cultural mentoring research, we not only continue to acknowledge their presence in the academy and higher education institutions, we also challenge stereotypical notions of assumed roles in cross-cultural mentoring relationships due to race.

The findings from this study also provide important implications for praxis, or theoretically informed action. As a counter narrative to our understanding of cross-cultural mentoring, this study acknowledges the lived experiences of some Black female faculty who have mentored White students, and provides confirmation for other Black female faculty who may experience uncertainty with mentoring White female students. Given that most higher education graduate programs are

housed at predominately White institutions (Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2015), Black female faculty may find themselves being asked to serve as mentors to White students. The Black female standpoint provides insight to these faculty who may consider entering into a cross-cultural mentoring relationship. Specifically, faculty must consider the importance of acknowledging feelings and initial reactions as a result of the request and the significance of embracing and engaging in a screening process that speaks to their consciousness. These faculty's ability to self-define, self-value, self-rely, and self-empower are integral to understanding the racial dynamics that may impact their desire and ability to mentor White female students. This can clearly be seen in Imani's words that, "Mentoring is a genuine friendship," and when Black women have an awareness of and embrace the four consciousnesses, they open themselves up to the possibility of connecting with White female students in deeper ways.

This study also provides implications for White students who may intentionally seek mentorship from a Black female faculty member. First, students should give faculty ample time to process the request for mentorship. As we learned from both Eliza's and Vanessa's responses, these requests may elicit certain feelings that take time to be worked through. Thus, White students should not ask for an immediate answer but rather phrase their request in a way that adequately provides these faculty members with the time to process through the request. Second, White students should ensure they have a strong understanding of race, racism, and privilege, both on an individual and systemic level, and convey this understanding to their potential mentor. While this implication speaks to individual actions, it reiterates the important role of institutions of higher education in educating and encouraging competency around equity, diversity, and inclusion (College Student Educators International & Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010), especially for White students. Third, White female students should remain open to the various ways in which a cross-cultural mento-

ring relationship with a Black female professor could develop. Vanessa reminded us that the naming of a cross-cultural mentoring relationship may require both the White mentee and the mentor of color to identify the relationship as such. Additionally, Rachel's experience highlighted that shared research could be one way in which a mentoring relationship can develop, while Imani focused on the importance of friendship within a mentoring relationship.

## Conclusion

Previous research on cross-cultural mentoring in higher education has provided important implications for engaging in a mentoring relationship, specifically when one person is White and the other a person of color. At the same time, this scholarship has essentially assumed the mentor to be White and the mentee a person of color. Consequently, we know very little about how people of color, enter into cross-cultural mentoring relationships with White students.

Our study with six Black female faculty provided insight into this process, suggesting that while individual Black faculty may have unique experiences entering into mentoring relationships with White female students, a Black feminist standpoint does exist. These faculty members entered into the relationships cautiously and with thought, responding emotionally to the idea of mentoring White students, and screening the students, before formalizing the relationship via a student-centered approach. The findings from this study serve as a starting point in which to better understand faculty of color's experiences mentoring White students as well as provide implications for both faculty and students who may enter into such a relationship.



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