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Research in Brief - '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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Research in Brief - '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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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 nondominant 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.

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. 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?

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

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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 relation-

ships (Frierson, Hargrove & Lewis, 1994; Guiffrida, 2005). 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).

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, and 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 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).

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. 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).

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.

Data Collection

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

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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.

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 mentor-

ing. 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).

Findings

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.

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 woman, 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. 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. Third, the participants focused on growth rather than replication.

She felt strongly that mentoring had to both personal and professional. She shared that, "Mentoring is a genuine friendship and if it is only professional then it is artificial."

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 consciousness 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 particular 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 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?

Screening

After acknowledging their initial feelings about entering into a mentoring relationship with a White female student, the Black women 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 female 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.

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 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.

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.

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.

Discussion and Implications

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. 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.

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. 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. Third, White female students should remain open to the various ways in which a cross-cultural mentoring relationship with a Black female professor could develop.

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. 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.