

Cross-Cultural Mentoring: Exploration through the Lens of African American Students

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Abstract: Culture, trust and prejudice may impact cross-cultural mentoring relationships among African American students attending colleges in the United States. By recognizing the cultural perceptions and differences that exist, mentors and protégés may develop a better understanding of each other's culture so as to enhance mentoring outcomes and student success.

Proponents of diversity in the 1980s argued that “only through an education that emphasized diversity could individuals understand the world, recognize inequities, and gain the tools needed to remedy those inequities” (Baez, 2000, p. 44). Cross-cultural mentoring in academe is one such tool that can promote the exploration of freedom, to cross cultural boundaries and affirm ethnic identities (Cotton, 1993). Cross-cultural mentoring occurs when diverse cultures including Asians, Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, African Americans or Whites serve as mentors to students of other cultures.

Today's culturally pluralistic institutions require mentors who can identify with and understand the needs of all students. Cultural pluralism has emerged during the last two decades; Asians and Pacific Islanders accounted for 7% of college enrollment, African American students for 14%, and Hispanic enrollment, 9% in 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2005). This shift requires that support systems, including mentorships specifically, within university settings become socially inclusive so as to equitably increase enrollment and success of all students. Comprehensive enrollment and graduation rates, unfortunately, are not recorded for all the aforementioned groups at this time. Data shows, however, that racial/ethnic composition of the freshman cohort at US baccalaureate institutions in 1998 was 72% White, 11% African American, 6% each Hispanic and Asian, and 1% American Indian students (NCES, 2006). The difference in graduation rates between White and African American students was 18 percentage points and between White and Hispanic students, approximately 12 percentage points (NCSE, 2006). These disparities make us question whether stronger support for minority cultural groups may encourage higher college enrollment and success rates.

Mentoring may be considered one form of support that can benefit these cultural groups. Mentoring occurs when more knowledgeable and experienced individuals assist the development and growth of others (Caffarella, 1992). Mentees, also known as protégés, benefit from mentors' knowledge, contacts, support, and guidance and also find internal value from interpersonal dialogue, collaborative critical thinking, planning, reflection, and feedback (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995). “The idea of learning as a transaction--an interactive and evolving process between mentors and adult learners--is considered a fundamental component of the adult mentoring relationship” (ibid., p. 17).

We contend that in cross-cultural mentoring, where mentors of one culture support mentees of a different culture, the outcomes of the mentoring relationship may differ because of variations in socio-cultural dynamics. These dynamics reflect specific values, beliefs, norms, and even negative behaviors or attitudes that can affect academic achievement of cultural groups (Van Den Berg & Crisp, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to explore cross-cultural mentoring of African Americans students, toward identifying the factors that need to be understood, so as to

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enhance cross-cultural mentoring relationships in higher education. African American students refer to those of African descent, who are born in the Western hemisphere and are United States citizens.

This study will serve as a foundation for further inquiry into cross-cultural mentoring in light of increasing diversity in US colleges. Research questions are: What are the cultural factors that may impact cross-cultural mentoring of African American students? Do prejudicial attitudes arise within cross-cultural mentoring relationships? The paper will be organized into four main sections: conceptual framework, method, discussion and implications. First, we present the conceptual framework which explores the sociocultural, constructivist and transformative dynamics of cross-cultural mentoring. Second is the method section, which describes the process used to obtain research for this paper. Third is discussion on cultural factors, perceptions, trust and prejudicial attitudes as they impact cross-cultural mentoring. Finally, we present implications into cross-cultural mentoring within multi-ethnic academic climates.

Conceptual Framework

Collaborative learning by way of mentoring is grounded in socio-cultural and socio-constructive theories through interactions among peers, experts, and teachers, i.e., physical contexts (Shi, Mishra & Bonk, 2004). Through assimilation and accommodation, mentors and protégés connect their experiences and create new knowledge (Jonassen, 1996). They also try new ideas, skills, and roles with minimal risk (Kaye & Jacobson, 1996). The psycho-social function is the internal value of ongoing interpersonal dialogue, collaborative critical thinking, planning, reflection, and feedback (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995).

According to constructivist theory, learning is most effective when situated in a context where new knowledge and skills may be used so that individuals may construct meaning for themselves, within the context of interaction with others (Kerka, 1998). The cross-racial mentoring relationship departs from an isolated individual self, toward an interactional process where human beings experience a primary need for connection with others (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002).

Through a transformative learning approach, the mentor can facilitate emancipatory learning, by challenging, stimulating, and provoking critical thinking, to help the mentee become aware of any limiting habits of mind, values or actions (Cranton, 2002). Personal agency, the “freedom of adults to act toward their own growth and development” (Clark, 1993, p. 50), enables the mentee to feel empowered while maintaining his/her autonomy. Effective mentors, empathetic to mentees’ challenges, can enhance learning by helping the mentee find ways to overcome personal resistance emanating from unconscious, internalized dimensions, lack of empowerment and feelings of inequity. A harmonious, cross-cultural mentoring relationship, achieved through mutuality within common interests, will enable the mentee’s academic, and personal and professional success (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978).

Method

A preliminary search for literature was conducted through educational (ERIC), and interdisciplinary (Proquest and OmniFile Full Text Mega) databases using the keywords *mentor* and *culture*. These two key words allowed us to source a wide range of articles related to our main concept of mentoring and culture, without narrowing the search too closely around the key terms in our research questions. We found 120 articles in ERIC, 65 from Proquest and 540 articles from OmniFile Full Text Mega. The titles and abstracts from these papers were then scanned for frequently recurring terms including *African American*, *cross-cultural mentoring*, *culture*, *attitudes*, and *perceptions*, which were chosen because they were directly related to our

research questions. Papers that provided insight into mentoring involving African Americans, cross-cultural mentoring, culture, attitudes, and perceptions were then read and used to develop this literature review. Articles with discussion on multicultural groups were also read since they supported discussion within this paper.

Discussion

Cultural Factors Surrounding Cross-Cultural Mentoring of African American Students

African American college students are often first generation, the first in their family to attend college. They frequently experience difficulties when confronted with cultural values and norms that contradict their own, and can benefit from the guidance of a mentor in these instances (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995). Culture clash occurs when socialization within another's culture is absent, therefore constraining the thinking, behaviors and beliefs of persons who may have been exposed to a "limited repertoire of practices, views and expectations" (Cleminson & Bradford, 1996, p. 255). Through a strongly developmental relationship (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995) mentor and mentee can explore cultural experiences from each other's point of view, and can develop a stronger understanding of each other's needs and expectations.

African American women experience an even harder time because of their "double minority status" (Jackson, 1996, p. 4) since being African American and being female pose a greater difficulty within the college environment. African American women typically prefer other African American women as mentors and as mentees (Jackson, 1996). Unfortunately, there are a limited number of African American women faculty in higher education, stemming from discord surrounding affirmative action and recruitment and retention of faculty of color (Cross & Lincoln, 2005). This, therefore, reduces the probability of African American mentees finding a mentor who understands the "hidden injuries" of race as well as the "hidden injuries" of gender (ibid., p. 45).

Perceptions. Mentors in cross-cultural mentoring relationships should recognize that their perspectives may differ socially and culturally from the mentee. This divide exists between the "haves" and "have-nots"; a mere 11% of students come from families in the lowest income quartile (about \$27,000 a year and under) and only 6% are first generation students (Merisotis, 2005) who may not readily accept support when they feel inferior. It is perceived by some cultures that social power is diminished when the culture and social standing of others is considered superior. Internalized perceptions of those who consider themselves inferior because of social standing, cultural and racial perceptions, and gender disparities in college settings require mentoring relationships built upon solid foundations of trust, understanding and respect.

Trust. Within the cross-cultural mentor-protégé relationship, a lack of trust may arise from historical and cultural biases, racial taboos, latent hostilities, and societal protocols (Bailey & Cervero, 2002; Lynch, 2002). Such feelings originated with the ancestors of today's African Americans, but fragments of the powerlessness they felt when they were enslaved have remained and have been deeply internalized (Foucault, 1980). Emotions stemming from trust or mistrust first need to be explored so that both mentor and mentee can find common ground, where cultural similarities and differences, and the proximal causes of those differences, must first be established (Dyal, 1984). Any resulting doubt or suspicion, or lack of confidence in the other, will negatively impact the relationship between mentors and mentees, their status, rights and duties to each other (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The lack of trust brings misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and possibilities of offending others based on potentially false assumptions.

Trust provides an underlying sense of interpersonal comfort and can be described as a feeling that arises when we can interact freely without fear of repercussions (Rusbult et al.,

1998). Without this interpersonal comfort, the mentoring relationship will continue to be undermined by suppressed emotions. Trust is therefore a necessary ingredient for learning within multi-cultural adult education contexts (Barlas, 2001). Trust encourages learners to question what they believe to be true, to affirm their and others' thoughts and actions (Barlas, 2001) and to be proactive in addressing insecurities, while continuing to learn. Trust becomes a cathartic connection as it strengthens the mentoring bond (Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, Anderson-Thompkins, Rasheed, & Hathawa, 2004).

Prejudicial Attitudes that Arise Within Cross-Cultural Mentoring Relationships

Prejudice is defined as “an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group” (Allport, 1954, p. 8). African Americans often feel “stereotyped and perceived as unintelligent, unmotivated, and unable of succeeding” in the higher education environment (Lynch, 2002, p. 8). Prejudicial feelings or presumptions about African Americans, which may be rooted in historical biases, can evoke feelings of mistrust, and undermine the mentoring relationship. These feelings can cause African Americans to remain on the “periphery of the educational experience” (ibid., 2002, p. 8). Knowledge of existing prejudices among cultural groups can help the mentor differentiate between honest and prejudicial actions, reactions or comments. By addressing and confronting personal prejudice, the mentor helps to remove any mental barriers that African American students may have constructed to protect themselves from ridicule, jealousy and racism (Gasman et al., 2004).

Mentors may often believe that mentees' behaviors in educational settings indicate indifference or stereotypical presumptions surrounding the mentor. For instance, many believe that African Americans are accepted into educational programs as token African Americans who boost minority statistics and fulfill funding requirements. This is frequently interpreted as African Americans being less intelligent, poor, and dependent on a dominant culture for academic enlightenment. These assumptions may negatively affect the mentoring relationship.

Implications

Culturally biased events on college campuses and within society in general, publicized via the media, expand the divide between mentors and their potential or respective mentees (Beyene et. al., 2002). Cultural perceptions can create biased assumptions from either side of the mentoring relationship. Empathy, developed through mutual understanding and respect, enables mentors and protégés to become more trusting and supportive (Jordan, 1997, p. 20). Deeper dialogues into culturally relevant education can inspire and motivate African American mentees toward persistence within a more inclusive and transformational mentoring environment, where participants can learn, grow and succeed.

Although there is support for same sex, same race mentoring relationships (Casto, Caldwell, & Salazar, 2005; Szelenyi, 2001; Thomas, Bierema, & Landau, 2004), mentoring amid diverse cultures encourages awareness and acceptance of others (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995). A homogenous approach to mentorship, which assumes that the dominant culture has the upper hand and is capable of being the better mentor, cannot sufficiently support all mentees. Both mentors and mentees bring to the mentoring process a “complex set of experiences, mental models, social and cultural identities, expertise, goals, expectations, values, and beliefs, all of which make for potential areas of conflict” (Cross, 2005, p. 44). Studies on cultural perspectives focusing on a mutual understanding of attitudes and perceptions are necessary toward an enhanced understanding of cross-cultural mentoring.

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