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**Mentoring and Intersectionality: Exploring Lived Experiences of Successful Minority  
Women Educational Leaders**

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# Mentoring and Intersectionality: Exploring Lived Experiences of Successful Minority Women Educational Leaders

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## **Abstract**

There is chronic underrepresentation of minority women in leadership positions across industries. This is especially salient in higher education, where around 10% of professorships and educational leadership positions are held by women of color. Mentoring is a possible tool to address this issue, but the findings are inconsistent as to how mentoring has helped these populations. Moreover, articles do not focus on intersectionality, mentoring, and leadership development in a higher education context. Therefore, positive mentoring outcomes may elude most minority women. The purpose of the current study is to explore the mentoring experiences (types and functions) that helped support minority women's leader and professional development. As part of a larger study, the preliminary results focus on five educational minority women leaders recruited for the study through purposive and snowball sampling for a 60-minute semi-structured interview. The preliminary findings centered on participants' experiences as a mentor and a mentee. They discussed 1) the factors that helped them to develop and sustain high-quality developmental relationships; 2) characteristics they believed mentors should possess; 3) the mentoring activities they engaged in with their mentors that contributed to their career and leader development; and 4) how they currently approach mentoring their own protégés based on these past experiences. Significance of the study and next steps were also discussed.

## **Background and Literature Review**

There is a lack of representation of minority women in leadership positions across industries. This is especially salient in higher education, where around 10% of professorships and educational leadership positions in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are held by women of color (Gilmer, Stokes, & Holbrook, 2014). As a result, minority women are not traversing the pipeline into leadership positions, although the workplace is more diverse (Murrell & James, 2002). Drawing from the intersectionality literature, the effects of racism and sexism may be amplified for minority women due to their simultaneous demographic membership. This results in discrimination based on stereotypes (Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston, 2016). This feeds into role incongruity, which posits that society assigns roles based on one's gender, violations of these roles results in negative assessments of the individual (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Ideal leadership characteristics tend to be male: assertive, agentic, authoritarian, etc. Therefore, women in leadership roles are in violation of the ideal leadership stereotype. For instance, Asian women receive poor leadership evaluations because of stereotypes that characterize them as not assertive or agentic (Rosette et al., 2016). This can result in stereotype threat, where the minority woman experiences psychological distress due to a fear of confirming these negative stereotypes (Vial et al., 2016). Taken together, minority women experience glass ceiling effect and/or leaky pipeline effect: their careers either plateau or they leave their institution or discipline altogether because there is no upward mobility and may work in toxic environments (Murrell & James, 2002).

Mentoring can offer minority women much needed support. Through a *traditional mentoring* (a senior organizational member develops a more junior organizational member; Kram, 1985) and *relational mentoring* (partners engage in mutual learning and development regardless of seniority; Ragins, 2016) theoretical frameworks, career support (advocacy, sponsorship, etc.) and psycho-social support (guidance, friendship, etc.), role modeling, and mutual support mentoring activities supports mentees' growth and development as a professional. However, the findings are inconsistent in the extant literature. Some studies argue that minorities/women need more career support, while others suggest they require more psycho-social support (McGuire, 1999; Murrell & James, 2002; Murrell et al., 2008). This leads to the research question, which centers on the exploration of the mentoring experiences (types of mentoring and functions) that helped support minority women leader and professional development:

What mentoring support functions have minority women leaders experienced in their diversified mentoring relationships that inspired them to pursue their leadership interests and helped them to achieve desirable leadership outcomes?

### **Methods**

For the current study, the researchers employed interpretive phenomenological analysis to construct meaning from the interpretations of the participants lived experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). As part of an on-going larger study on the diversified mentoring experiences of minority women educational leaders in STEM, the researchers utilized purposive sampling to recruit current educational leaders in higher education STEM related fields. They then engaged in snowball recruitment to contact other minority women leaders in their professional networks who meet the selection criteria and maybe interested in sharing their stories. For data collection, the researchers used semi-structured interviews via Zoom that lasted no more than 60 minutes. The questions centered on challenges they experienced in their professional careers, their leadership journey, and critical mentoring experiences. The researchers aim to recruit 15 total participants. The current study discusses the preliminary results of five participants.

The data analysis included a four-step process modeled after Smith and Osborn (2008). The researchers engaged in 1) multiple readings and note taking of the transcripts; 2) labeled emerging themes; 3) clustered themes into superordinate themes; and 4) created a code book. After each subsequent analysis, the researchers refined the codebook accordingly.

### **Findings**

The preliminary findings focused on the participants experiences as a mentee and a mentor. The themes that emerged centered on how they developed their relationships with their mentors, characteristics of their ideal mentor, mentoring activities they engaged in with their mentors, and how, based on those experiences, they approach mentoring with their own mentees. These themes were emergent.

### **Relationship Building**

The participants discussed the process whereby they established deep connections with a developer/mentor. They engaged in a *trial and error* process where they continued a relationship because time and the mentor demonstrated their openness, genuineness, and trustworthiness, etc., while they disengaged with an individual they did not perceive the individual as supportive. Moreover, for the relationships to grow and develop, the participants agreed that *trust was necessary*. Trust centered on feeling safe to confide in that other person about the challenges they experienced (either as a professional, minority, or woman), as well as the belief that the critical feedback given by their mentor is genuine with their best interests in mind. The participants also discussed the use of *relational savvy*, which is a tacit ability to discern whether or not to build a relationship with someone or disengage with that individual because it will not be a fruitful or healthy endeavor.

### **Ideal Mentor Characteristics**

As the conversations progressed, the participants described the characteristics of their ideal mentors. Their previous and current mentors tended to hold these characteristics. First, the participants had *gender preferences* with regards to their mentors. Specifically, many participants stated that same gender mentors provided a level of comfort and emotional connection. They also described the desirable *personality traits of mentors*, such as being compassionate, present, and dedicated. Moreover, others stated they sought *external mentors* (those located outside organization) to confide in and receive advice without fear of reprisal from their fellow organizational members. Finally, the participants discussed the *mentoring support* provided by their mentors, such as career support, advice on work-life balance, guidance, and empathetic listening.

### **Mentoring Experiences**

When asked about their prior mentoring experiences, many of the participants viewed their mentoring relationships as *formal and one-sided*: a senior organizational member developed a more junior member. The *mentoring support* they received from their mentor focused on career development, such as career advice, sponsorship, critical feedback, and advocacy. They also received psycho-social support from their mentors, such as affirmation and a safe space to vent about micro-aggressions they experienced in their workplace. Additionally, they *role modeled* their mentors' and other successful minority women's behavior and success.

Moreover, participants described their experiences with relational mentoring. Participants *conceptualization of relational mentoring* centered on reciprocity: support and contribute to one another (give and get advice etc.), leverage each other's expertise, and develop shared interests. These *relationships evolved over time* from a traditional to a more mutual friendship partnership. Features of these relationships included *affirmation* (mentor and mentee supported/encouraged one another's expression of their genuine self) and *active/empathetic listening* (reframed from judgment and listened with compassion) where each person engaged mutuality (both members actively learn and grow from the relationship).

### **Mentoring Approach**

Based on their mentoring experiences, the participants described how they approached mentoring with their mentees. First, the reason they mentored others was to pay it forward, pass on knowledge, and increase mentoring opportunities for minority women. Moreover, these approaches often paralleled their mentors. They also naturally participated in relational mentoring and learned from their mentees, such as remaining on top of current events that affected their students. Additionally, they engaged in mentoring episodes (short term mentoring that centered on career advice and support). More importantly, they proactively mentored minorities and women with support tailored to their unique challenges.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the key takeaways from the preliminary findings were 1) mentoring relationships required trust developed through trial and error; 2) minority women form mentoring schemas reflective of their unique experiences with mentoring relationships; 3) minority women received and engaged in a variety of mentoring support from different mentors; and 4) mutuality (as explained in relational mentoring) was a trait of long-term relationships.

The findings can fill the research gap on intersectionality and mentoring, as well as address the leaky pipeline and glass ceiling issues by increasing leadership diversity representation in higher education through building stronger/ more effective mentoring relationships for minority women. Thus, minority women gain better access to and use of mentoring/benefits.

### **Biography**

Ague Mae Manongsong is a second year PhD student in the Educational Leadership track, under the tutelage of Dr. Rajashi Ghosh. Prior to her doctoral studies, Ague Mae earned her MA in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Sacramento State University and an MA in Organizational Behavior and Evaluation from Claremont Graduate University. In addition to being a research assistant, she is also an editorial board member for SOE's Emerging Voices in Education Journal. Her current research interests center on the different applications of mentoring for the purposes of increasing the likelihood of positive leadership and career outcomes for minorities, women, women of color, as well as other marginalized groups. Specifically, Ague Mae seeks to explore how these different populations utilize and benefit from mentoring.

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