Mentoring Approaches of Minoritized Women: Insights from Administrative Leaders in Higher Education

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Abstract

Although faculty in higher education struggle to balance service commitments with their research productivity and career advancement, minoritized women faculty tend to carry heavier service loads than their white/male counterparts, especially with regards to mentoring engagements (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Minoritized women also lack role models to provide guidance on how to mentor successfully due to few mentoring opportunities (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2019; Smith, Smith, & Markham, 2000; Zambrana et al., 2015).Additionally, there is a dearth of literature on how minoritized women mentor others. The current interpretive phenomenological study seeks to fill the gap on how and why minoritized women engage in specific type of mentoring as explained by extant mentoring theories (traditional, relational, and holding behaviors). The semi-structured interviews revealed that the ten participants engaged in instances of traditional and relational mentoring functions, while performing holding behaviors for marginalized students and mentoring episodes. Thus, the paper offers unique insights into the approaches that minoritized women utilize to develop and advance their mentees, especially as they relate to challenges of racism and sexism.

Background and Literature Review

Mentors engage in a variety of mentoring activities that aids in mentees' growth as a professional (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 2012). There are three theoretical frameworks that delineate these mentoring support functions. *Traditional mentoring* refers to developmental relationships where a senior organizational member develops a more junior organizational member (Kram, 1985). Mentors provide career support (advocacy, sponsorship, etc.), psycho-social support (guidance, friendship, etc.), and role modeling. *Relational mentoring* refers to partnerships rather than one-sided developmental relationships where mentoring pairs engage in activities for their mutual growth and development (Ragins, 2016). *Holding behaviors* provide non-judgmental support in response to situations that cause the mentees distress, such as discrimination based on sex or race (Ghosh et al., 2013; Kahn, 2001; Ragins et al., 2015).

Moreover, universities use mentoring as a student support service to promote inclusivity through increasing retainment of underrepresented populations in higher education (Fonts, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, mentoring engagement is a high service demand that departmental review committees tend to not weigh as heavily as productivity in terms of research, publications, and grants in the promotion and tenure process (Griffin & Reddick, 2011). This is especially problematic for marginalized faculty, such as women of color, because they experience large volumes of mentoring requests from majority and minoritized students, which takes them away from their research responsibilities (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2015).

Furthermore, minoritized women faculty, who often lack role models of similar backgrounds, have little guidance from their departments and universities on how to mentor (Griffin et al., 2011; Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Similarly, there is a general lack of empirical work on minoritized women faculty's mentoring patterns: why mentors, especially minoritized women mentors, provide certain type of support. Additionally, given their high service demands (Griffin & Reddick, 2011), there is a dearth of information on how minoritized women mentor successfully. The current study aligns the mentoring provided by minoritized women to the tenets of the previously discussed mentoring theories. This leads to the research question:

How do minoritized women approach mentoring with similar and dissimilar others?

Methods

Research Design and Sampling

As part of an on-going larger study, the research team used interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) to reveal insights into the human experience of mentoring (Heidegger, 1962). The researchers used semi-structured 60-minute interviews held through Zoom. The questions centered on the role mentoring played in their professional and leadership development journeys. To recruit participants, the research team then utilized purposive and snowball sampling of educational leaders in higher education STEM-related fields. The selection criteria included the following characteristics: identification as a minoritized woman (black, Asian, Latin, or Middle Eastern descent), currently employed at a university (private or public community college or four-year university), and currently an administrative leader within their department or university at large.

In total, the sample comprised of ten minoritized women leaders from two East Coast Universities. The sample was predominately women of African American descent (n = 5), followed by Asian descent (n = 3) and Latin descent (n = 2). They held the titles of Dean and Director, but to ensure the participants of their confidentiality, the research team did not report job titles or departments. Furthermore, all participants utilized a traditional mentoring approach, with only seven using some facets of relational mentoring and three explicitly using holding behaviors.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis included a four-step coding 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 findings centered on the various types of mentoring functions and activities (traditional, relational, and holding behaviors) participants engaged in with mentees who were either similar

or dissimilar to them in terms of race and gender. These themes were emergent, as well as aligned with the mentoring literature on mentoring functions discussed by Kram (1985), Ragins (2011), and Ragins et al., (2015), respectively.

Traditional Mentoring

Due to a sense of purpose for mentoring others, either those with similar or dissimilar backgrounds, they engaged in the career development (e.g., sponsorship, advocacy, etc.), psych-social support (e.g., acceptance, counseling, etc.), and role modeling functions identified by Kram (1985). Moreover, an important aspect of their mentoring approach was to customize the traditional mentoring support based on the needs of their mentees because of their own mentoring experiences as minoritized individuals.

Relational Mentoring

Most participants included aspects of relational mentoring (i.e., affirmation of authentic self, mutuality) (Ragins, 2011) in their approach as doing so enabled them to develop meaningful connection with their mentees. The participants affirmed the authentic self of their mentees because they experienced fear of being judged as per racial or gender stereotypes, and were unable to express their true selves. They did this through encouraging mentees' confidence, which buffers against self-doubt induced by racism and sexism in academia. Moreover, as mentors, minoritized women leaders ensured that mutuality was central to their relationships. They looked forward to learning from their younger mentees as a source of complementary knowledge or expertise. Mentoring also helped the participants to become more aware of their own developmental needs.

Holding Behaviors

Given their unique mentoring experiences and leadership journey, the participants provided numerous examples of how they enacted holding behaviors to help mentees from minoritized backgrounds deal with anxiety-producing experiences at work (Ragins et al., 2015). For instance, they engaged in holding behaviors that provided containment: they were accessible and offered a safe space for minoritized students to share their negative experiences (Kahn, 2001; Ragins et al., 2015). Additionally, they engaged in holding behaviors that offered enabling perspectives which helped mentees make sense of conflict and rebuild their ego in a nonjudgmental and validating context, such as self-advocacy and picking one's battles (Khan, 2001; Ragins et al., 2015).

Mentoring Episodes

Minoritized women leaders also engaged in *mentoring episodes* as a counter to the expectation they invest and form deep personal connections (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Flowers et al., 2015; Griffin & Reddick, 2011). Mentoring episodes are short term high quality developmental interactions (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). The participants gave advice freely, but did not view themselves as a traditional mentor. Thus, a minoritized woman leader could have one-off interactions with multiple students and still meet these individuals particular developmental

need, while preserving their energy to be productive because they do not require the emotional labor to build long-term mentoring relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants provided a detailed account of the variety of mentoring strategies they used to promote the personal and career interests of their mentees. The findings demonstrated that even when faced with what the extant literature labeled a cultural taxation on their time (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Griffin & Reddick, 2011), the participants in this study were eager to engage in mentoring due to their sense of duty and the value they placed on mentoring. They proactively mentored minoritized individuals and women with support tailored to their unique challenges. Through their relationships, they created safe spaces for these individuals and utilized their mentees as a source for their own development.

Given the participants' willingness to engage in numerous mentoring activities and approaches to best meet the developmental needs of their participants, administration should support and recognize minoritized women for their mentoring efforts. Currently, minoritized women struggle to meet the requirements of promotion and tenure review process due to the tax mentoring has on their time (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Turner et al., 2011; Tyson & Borman, 2010) and have to strategize, through the use of alternative mentoring approaches, to meet the service and productivity demands, such as the use of mentoring episodes. This will contribute to making the service and productivity demands experienced by minoritized women leaders more manageable, while mentees continue to reap the benefits of their guidance.

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Biography

Ague Mae Manongsong is a PhD Candidate 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.