Mentoring Minorities: Examining Mentoring from a Race and Gender Lens

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Abstract—What do we truly understand about how race and gender intersect to influence mentoring experiences, particularly the experiences of African Americans in higher education? Mentoring is frequently cited as a mechanism to support the success of African-American undergraduates and African-American faculty. For racial minority students, isolation is often a key factor in seeking a mentor. Although a mentor may be a plausible solution, there are other factors that must be examined in order to truly increase the success of African Americans in higher education. For example, how does race and gender affect mentoring relationships? In this paper, I identify and examine mentoring and its characteristics as well as the constructs of race, gender, and intersectionality and in particular how they relate to African-American mentoring relationships in higher education.

Keywords: mentoring, African Americans, race, gender, intersectionality

Introduction

There is a national educational call to increase retention and graduation rates of underrepresented populations in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) undergraduate and graduate majors [1]. This call is driven by the need to produce U.S. scientists and engineers capable of fulfilling future STEM jobs [2]. From 2001-2010, Blacks earned only approximately 8.4% of the total number of awarded science and engineering bachelor's degrees[3]. Resources have been directed to capitalize on the diversity of the U.S. population and to get more underrepresented populations enrolled in STEM majors. However, financial resources alone will not increase diversity in STEM majors because it is also necessary to understand what issues and obstacles underrepresented populations encounter in their college experiences which may affect STEM retention rates. Even with the assistance of financial and academic resources, some underrepresented undergraduate populations may have negative college experiences which can result in deciding to leave STEM majors. Specifically, African-Americans' college experiences can encompass negative aspects such as cultural alienation, loneliness, and isolation [4-7]. To aid in producing scientists and engineers to fulfill STEM jobs, it is important to understand how the experiences of college students, particularly racial minority students, may divert them from persisting in STEM fields.

For many racial minority students, the transition into college can be challenging, fraught with many issues ranging from social and academic isolation, encountering negative attitudes and behaviors, and fears of fulfilling stereotypes [8,9]. The consequences of these issues are grave: social and academic isolation and lack of support in particular, can detrimentally impact minority students' academic performances [10,11]. Mentoring has been viewed as an effective deterrent to combat the isolation experienced by minority students [12,13]. In considering mentoring as a mechanism which assists in facilitating minority students' success, it is necessary to understand what is mentoring and what roles do race and gender play in mentoring functions. The three main goals of this paper are to define: (1) what mentoring is and its characteristics, (2) what are the roles of race and gender especially as related to mentoring, and (3) how does intersectionality influence African Americans who participate in mentoring relationships in higher education.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is defined as a process in which an experienced individual (a mentor) acts as a role model and guide for a less experienced person (a protégé) specifically advising he or she in academic, personal, and/or professional aspects of their lives [14-16]. The term "mentor" comes from the Greek poet Homer, in which Odysseus in *The Odyssey* selected "a trusted friend, Mentor, to educate, tutor, protect, and guide his son" (p. 66) [17]. Professional mentoring originates in teaching, medical, and clinical practices [18,19]. The meaning of the word "mentor" can have multiple contextual meanings such as "teacher", "counselor", or "advisor" relative to corporate and educational environments.

In general, mentors provide feedback regarding career plans and interpersonal development and are committed to helping protégés succeed in the adult working world [14]. Thus, mentoring influences protégés' academic achievement, career motivation, self-esteem, and leadership capabilities [15,16,20,21]. These achievements are accomplished through the development of mentoring relationships between mentors and protégés over time.

Formal and informal mentoring

The structure of mentoring can be formal or informal. Typically, mentoring relationships that are arranged are considered to be formal mentorships [15]. Formal mentoring programs or relationships are typically initiated by a third party who desires to implement mentorships. This third party initiation may affect the dynamic of mentoring relationships that develop. Formal mentorships "entail a degree of pressure; the mentor and the protégé may be required to participate in the mentorship program as a function of their positions" (p. 621)[16]. Formal mentoring is generally orchestrated by a coordinator or system in which mentors and protégés are assigned to each other and meet under the terms of a structured program format with specified objectives and goals [21]. Because the mentors and protégés of a formal mentorship may be assigned with or without prior approval or voluntarily assigned, they may not have the same level of identification and interpersonal comfort as dyads that started their mentoring relationships informally and/or involuntarily [21].

Informal mentorships tend to grow out of informal relationships and interactions between mentors and protégés. Typically, informal mentorships develop from "a desire on the part of the mentor to help the protégé and a willingness on the part of the protégé to be open to advice and assistance from the mentor" (p. 621)[16]. Typically, informal mentoring relationships are generated from informal interactions or friendships, a mentor's recognition of a protégé's potential to benefit from their attention, and/or shared interests between the mentor and protégé [15]. There may be few minimal significant differences between formal and informal mentoring except that the initiation process of the relationship may constrain some mentorship benefits [16]. However, in comparing studies of formal and informal mentoring programs and relationships, generally "formal mentoring is better than no mentoring but not as effective as informal mentoring" (p. 567) [22]. Thus it is better to participate in mentoring, whether formal or informal in nature, yet informal mentoring may be more beneficial in that it provides opportunities for mentoring relationships to grow beyond structured requirements.

Positive and negative perspectives of mentoring

There are several views that support or refute formal and informal mentoring programs and relationships as successful mechanisms. Some research indicates that mentoring can be positive simply because it provides protégés with support, whereas other research studies present a lack of appropriately skilled mentors as a potential detrimental aspect of mentoring. There are many factors that attribute to the successes or failures of mentoring relationships.

Long (1997) suggests that some negative aspects of mentoring are that some mentorships lack process planning and that some mentors may lack an appropriate understanding of what a positive mentoring relationship necessitates[23]. In addition, mentors may be undertrained about how to mentor or how to address the specific mentoring needs of their protégés [24-26]. Negative mentoring experiences may also be attributable to discrepancies in mentors' professional expertise or a mismatch of the personalities of mentors and protégés which can result in mentors and protégés not getting along [25]. Extreme differences between mentors and protégés' philosophies, or significant personality differences can result in mentoring failures [27].

However, mentoring can offer many benefits to both mentors and protégés. Mentors may provide emotional and psychological support, foster advice for career and personal development, and/or positively influence the self-efficacy of protégés [28,29]. As a mechanism which provides support and encourages development, mentoring can increase minority undergraduate student retention rates, and foster the development of social support among students and faculty [30]. For racial minority students, mentoring may increase protégés' abilities to demonstrate resiliency by learning how to overcome obstacles from their mentors as well as acquiring and accumulating cultural and social capital from their mentors [10]. To create positive mentoring outcomes, formal and informal mentoring programs and relationships must appropriately match mentors and protégés and ensure that mentors have the respective expertise and mentoring skills necessary to counter the development of negative mentoring experiences.

The roles of race and gender in mentoring

Recent research asks how the process of mentoring is affected by race and gender in the matching of mentors and protégés. Singh and Stoloff (2003) have noted that "mentors tend to select as protégés persons who are of the same gender and who share with themselves a number of social and cultural attributes or background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion and social class" (p. 6) [31]. In a study seeking to evaluate whether having a mentor of the same race and gender matters, researchers collected data from over 1000 undergraduate and graduate students and post-docs from the MentorNet e-mentoring online community [20]. Study results indicated that matching mentors and protégés by gender or race really made no difference at all and students who have mentors have better experiences and academic success in comparison to students without mentors. This means that social networks are often homogeneous thereby giving more advantages to the people in the network. The study results also support that formal networks and relations may better promote diversity by intent.

However, what is lacking from research is an in-depth examination of how race and gender influence mentoring. Research studies continue to examine and argue the deficits and

benefits of cross-cultural and cross gender mentoring relationships [32,33]. Yet, it is necessary to understand what roles race and gender play in mentoring and how race and gender intersect to influence mentorships, particularly those involving African Americans.

The role of race

Omi and Winant (1994) define race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 55) [34]. Race is used to "provide clues about who a person is" and "without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity" (p. 12) [34]. Race is historically and socially constructed, it facilitates the segregation of people into racial groups. Racial categorization creates different experiences for different racial groups. Therefore, the experiences of African Americans as a racial group can be examined. Racial perceptions in society influence how we present ourselves, our status distinctions, and what is considered to be appropriate conduct [34]. Race is historically, socially, and politically woven into institutional climates and environments [34,35] and African Americans are racially grouped. If higher education institutions are structured by race, then African Americans experience institutions in different ways than other racial groups.

Likewise, race affects power relations through mechanisms such as White privilege. White privilege represents unearned benefits afforded people with light skin by virtue of the history of colonization and slavery in the United States [36,37]. This privilege is an unearned advantage and is based on conferred dominance [37]. White privilege allows Whites to perform certain actions without their actions or intent being questionable or perceived as threatening due to their race [37]. Some examples of the "privileges that Whites have include: positive representation in school curriculum materials, media, contribution to civilization, positions of authority; representation and availability of 'white' related goods and services; freedom of association, residential choice, and the granting of insider status in organizations; unquestioned acceptance of financial reliability and employment credibility; freedom from the burden of representing the 'white race'" (p. 151) [38].

These privileges function not only as advantages, but also as distinctions of what benefits other racial groups lack which can result in variances in the treatment and experiences of racial groups. For example, Crenshaw (1989) describes the case of some Black women who sued the General Motors company for discrimination against Black women; their lack of white privilege which parallels their lack of male privilege was detrimental to their recognition as a group affected by the intersection of both race and gender[39]. The result was a lack of recognizing that they possessed multiple characteristics which contribute to the makeup of their entire identities accordingly [39]. Since Whites possess privilege that affords them advantages over other racial groups, this creates problematic racial and power relations with other subordinated racial groups [39,40]. Also, White privilege can put non-White people, such as African Americans, into precarious positions where they may be required to explain why their experiences are different, or how race or racism functions as a part of their experiences. For example, because White privilege allows Whites freedom from being representatives of their race, then there may be situations in which African Americans or non-Whites have to explain why they must conduct themselves in a certain manner. Consequently, in mentoring relationships, mentors may be confronted with having to counsel and support their African-American protégés with dealing

with experiences in which their protégés find that they must defend their academic abilities to other students and/or faculty or they encounter situations in which they feel that they must behave in a certain manner because they are perceived as "representatives" of their race [31,41].

Another example of potential race relations that may be attributable to White privilege is seen in cross-cultural mentoring concerns. Some research questions how well mentors who are different races than their protégés effectively mentor their protégés without being able to understand some of their protégés' racial experiences [32,42]. For example, African-American protégés, especially STEM protégés, may be confronted with issues related to a fear of fulfilling stereotypes and/or with the responsibility of refuting stereotypes (e.g. "Blacks are not good at math and science"). African-American protégés need mentors who can be culturally sensitive in understanding their experiences as well as mentoring them on how to deal with their experiences [26,43]. However, this does not mean that cross-cultural mentoring is not beneficial or needed, but rather that in mentoring relationships, mentors must be culturally sensitive to their protégés' experiences [10]. In examining the role of race in mentoring relationships, the issue is not that the races of mentors and protégés must be the *same* to have an effective relationship, but rather that White privilege can hinder White mentors' understanding of issues associated with the racial experiences of a protégé of another race.

Similar to how White privilege can affect Whites' perspectives, African Americans may be affected by ethnicity paradigms that attribute their inabilities to be successful to race. From an ethnicity paradigm, the "bootstraps model" proposes that ethnic groups should be able to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" and be successful in academic, business, and personal endeavors through applying themselves [34]. This means that non-White ethnic groups should be able to perform as well as the White majority group under the same circumstances by simply applying themselves [34]. However, this paradigm lacks consideration of circumstances which may influence the success of these non-White ethnic groups, namely the fact that the model incorrectly assumes that many ethnic groups have the same norms and circumstances as the majority. A demonstration of the faulty "bootstraps model" suggests that "If Chicanos don't do well in school, this cannot, even hypothetically, be due to low-quality education; it has instead to do with Chicano values. After all, Jews and Japanese Americans did well in inferior schools, so why can't other groups?" (p. 21) [34].

The "bootstraps model" assumes that all ethnic groups are subjected to the same group norms and circumstances as other groups and that there are "the universal conditions to which each ethnic group must accommodate" (p. 21) [34]. The model ignores "ongoing processes of discrimination, shifts in the prevailing economic climate," and "concrete sociopolitical dynamics within which racial phenomena operate in the U.S." (p. 21) [34]. The result is that the failure of racial groups to prosper and/or assimilate is attributed to their race instead of recognizing that there are circumstances that racial minorities encounter which makes their experiences distinct in comparison to the experiences of the majority. So, the "bootstraps model" is not useful in that it assumes that every racial group is operating under the same circumstances or "on a level playing field" which is not only false, but also the model perpetuates a false assumption that racial differences have no effect on people's abilities to succeed. This model downplays the social, cultural, and economic effects that race has on people's experiences.

In higher education mentoring relationships, the "bootstraps model" may affect African-American protégés because they may feel as though they are expected to be successful academically and personally in a college environment without consideration of the challenges they may experience due to race and race-related circumstances that differ from the experiences of the majority of the population[6,34]. Given the small number of African Americans attaining bachelor's degrees in science and engineering [2,3], it is important to examine what role race may play in the experiences of these students in order to determine how to create an environment that acknowledges and addresses how social, cultural and economic factors influence their experiences and deter persistence in STEM fields. Examining the role of race in the experiences of these students from a mentoring perspective indicates that mentors need to be able to create an opportunity for discourse and guidance to help their protégés deal with their experiences and assist them in navigating academia [7,30].

The role of gender

In addition to race and race relations, gender relations and gender norms affect people's experiences as well. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that "gender, […], is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (p. 169) [44]. In choosing to identify as a certain gender, people are subjected to experiences in which their gender can affect several aspects of their gender relations. In the following paragraphs, I discuss how elements of gender such as emotional relations, gender relations, and gender symbolism influence relationships and in particular, mentoring relationships in higher education.

Emotional relations relate to gender because human relationships are based on the emotional connections that people feel to each other and gender can influence how people connect to each other in terms of assuming roles believed to be associated with men or women [45]. Symbolism affects how cultural representations of gender and gendered attitudes affects how people relate to their environments [45]. These two dimensions of Connell's (2002) gender model, emotional relations and symbolism, are used to examine gender because they address the emotional aspects of gender in regards to how do people connect to each other and to their environments through relationships and expressions which is important for understanding how gender influences how people behave.

Gender relations are relationships that are directly or indirectly related to reproduction and influence how people interact with each other to constitute social order [45]. Gender affects the emotional and cognitive work people do and how they relate to their roles. The emotional relations dimension of gender relations evaluates the importance of emotional attachments and how these attachments may be influenced by gender. For example, the role of caring for children may be emotionally tied to the perception that "that is what women do". Likewise, how certain jobs train workers to attend to the needs of customers in a docile or nurturing manner may be associated as being feminine aspects [45]. Consequently, emotional relationships may be gendered such that women and men assume masculine or feminine roles associated with their roles in their personal or professional relationships. Thus, gender and gender relations can affect the roles that mentors assume with their protégés in that mentors may nurture their protégés based on assumed "gender appropriate" roles[46]. For example, if mentors consider certain STEM majors to be more

appropriate for men than women, then they may advise their female protégés to not consider these majors. Associating academic majors with a certain gender may stymy the demographic makeup of certain fields. Women represent a small number of the STEM undergraduate and STEM faculty populations[47,48]. Therefore, it is important to examine how gender plays a role in persistence in STEM fields and in STEM mentoring relationships.

In addition, social practices exhibited in gendered emotional relations can also produce elements of gender symbolism. Gender symbolism is the practice of how gender is embedded in social structures and environments through means such as language, media, or attitudes [45]. Women faculty role models have served as symbols because they affected whether women majoring in science, math, or engineering (SME) believed "that their own presence in the major was 'normal'" (p. 302) [4]. In Seymour & Hewitt's (1997) landmark study, sometimes women students wanted to see female faculty in their majors and teaching them so that they felt confident about their major selection and the possibility that they could succeed [4]. The persistence of women in SME areas is affected by faculty members in those areas, even if faculty members do not realize that they symbolize that SME does not solely represent masculinity and/or they may play critical roles as sources of counsel, caring, and encouragement to women [4]. Thus, in relation to mentoring, gender symbolism can influence the number of African-American undergraduates that persist in STEM fields in that the more male and female African-American faculty members that are visible to students and available to mentor students, the more inclined students may feel to persist [4,43]. Research indicates that it is important for women and racial minorities in SME majors to have mentors and roles models, but departments need to focus on changing the norms, practices, and climates which inhibit these groups from persisting in STEM [4,49].

Intersectionality and African Americans in higher education

In evaluating some of the characteristics and effects of race and gender, it is important to note that these classifications are not necessarily able to be dissected and examined as individual entities that affect people's experiences. Race and gender are socially constructed and link social structure and signification. They are not fixed, discrete categories, but rather "overlap, intersect, and fuse with each other in countless ways" (p. 68)[34]. Race and gender, as well as other socially constructed concepts that contribute to one's identity, must be understood intersectionally.

Intersectionality is defined as how socially-constructed social categories such as race and gender intersect and influence experiences [50,51]. Instead of examining race, gender, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference as singular identities, Riley & Pawley (2011) use intersectionality to look at individuals' experiences through their narratives which reflected their intersecting identities [51]. In looking at the intersectionality of race and gender and its effect on mentoring, intersectionality can provide insight into how race and gender influence mentors' identities as well as how they mentor their protégés.

African-American male and female faculty members in higher education have different experiences from their White counterparts as well as each other [31,52]. Some of these differences may be subjection to stereotypes and/or over engaging in mentoring protégés [26,43]. For African-American mentors, race and gender (and other categories) influence how they see themselves

and affect how they mentor others. Thus their identities are intersections of who they are and affect the roles they play as mentors. These roles vary based on context because "roles are *situated* identities - assumed and relinquished as the situation demands - rather than *master identities* (Hughes 1945), such as sex category, that cut across situations" (p. 170) [44]. Assuming a singular framework for examining discrimination instead of acknowledging the intersectionality of race and gender in identity, especially against Black women, marginalizes Black women and their experiences [39,47].

The experiences of African-American male and female faculty members may be influenced by race and gender. Some issues these groups confront are dealing with stereotypes about their academic abilities within educational contexts, hostile campus climates, and racism [43]. Griffin and Reddick (2011) argued that some Black faculty at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) tend to overengage in service and mentoring due to reasons such as an inclination to assist racial minority students [43]. Some ways in which race and gender may intersect to influence African-American mentors is that their respective race or gender may cause them to create relationships that require more time for mentoring especially for minority students who look to them as role models and/or counselors. For example, some African-American faculty members may assume mothering or nurturing roles that exceed typical mentoring relationships due to their ability to relate to their protégés' issues and a desire to help them avoid obstacles that they have encountered due to their race or gender [53,54]. Also, "male and female faculty members' experiences in mentoring relationships may differ" in that female faculty members may devote more time to teaching, advising, and mentoring students (p. 4) [43]. Thus, gender differences may also influence how much time faculty members devote to mentoring.

Due to a lack of racial minority faculty at academic institutions[55], there is limited accessibility to same race/same gender mentors for African-American protégés. Despite potential mentoring relationship needs of African-American students, there is a paucity of African-American faculty who both serve as mentors and still maintain scholarly productivity and career goals for advancement [56]. Due to the lack of minority faculty, "African American students may find establishing a positive identity in the university environment difficult without faculty to identify with" (p. 88) [30]. So, there may be a lack of available African-American mentors for students as well as overworking of the current African-American faculty members in higher education.

Also, tenured women faculty numbers are lower than the supply of female science and engineering doctoral degree recipients in recent decades [57]. Thus the potential to change the male-gendered climate of STEM or to create gender symbolism that associates more women with STEM fields is likely limited. In addition, women in STEM higher education may tend to leave due to issues with the workplace environment, implicit bias, and/or family responsibilities. [57].

Examining aspects of how race and gender intersect especially as related to African-American mentors is complex and situated. Gender theories can overlook race by creating a situation where gender and race are not examinable as multiple dimensions of identities that contribute to the experiences of groups such as the issue for the Black female employees who sued GM. Similarly, issues of race may also engage gender issues in that women of color may

be inhibited by their race and gender like the way in which some STEM women of color faculty members may be presumed incompetent based on their race and gender [58]. The result is that these women may be inclined to behave in a certain manner in order to successfully navigate academia. The point is that intersectionality adds multiple dimensions to examining the experiences of multiple groups, but it may also unintentionally create instances in which one social category overlooks another or that multiple categories overlap and interact.

In examining both race and gender, "intersectional analysis adds nuance to our understanding of how expectations and engagement in mentoring differs between Black faculty members and their colleagues, as well as how racism and sexism potentially differentiate the mentoring patterns of Black female and male faculty members" (p. 5)[43]. Intersectional analysis is very relevant and critical to understanding the experiences and effects of race and gender on African-American mentors' identities. Mentoring literature is beginning to address mentoring experiences in greater detail, yet "much work remains to be done on the mentoring experiences of marginalized populations" (p. 512) [56].

Conclusions: why race and gender matter in mentoring

Race and gender matter as individual categories and as constructs that intersect and influence the experiences of people of different groups. Race and gender matter for several reasons. The fact that there are racial group classifications causes differences in the treatment of racial groups as well as differences in racial groups' lived experiences. The existence of White privilege creates unearned advantages for Whites as compared to non-White racial groups which also contribute to racial dissonance. Mechanisms such as the "bootstraps model" incorrectly perpetuate the idea that everyone is afforded the same opportunities under the same circumstances and provides an inappropriate means for attributing failures to race or gender. Similarly, gender is influenced by emotional relations and symbolism in that it can affect the way people relate to each other sometimes biasedly as well as the roles and attitudes we assume should be associated with certain gender roles. This can contribute to perpetuating discriminatory ideas and practices about what roles, qualities, and/or jobs should be associated with certain genders. Consequently, both race and gender influences relations, particularly mentoring relationships.

Understanding how race and gender intersect and influence mentors' mentoring approaches may provide insight into how mentoring relationships foster success, and identify what obstacles protégés confront and how mentors help them deal with them. For example, future research studies may be able to identify examples of how African-American mentors relate to and identify with their protégés, in particular their protégés' racial and gendered experiences, in order to mentor them successfully. These types of findings would be valuable for mentors of all races who interact with African-American protégés and they may be able to garner some useful mentoring practices from it.

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