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Addressing Marginalization and Mentoring: Examining Power and Interests

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Abstract: *Mentoring relationships are socially constructed, and the power that mentors have and exercise within mentoring relationships can be helpful or hurtful to protégés. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore mentoring literature and models from the fields of adult education, general education, and human resource development, examining issues of power in mentoring within this literature. Ways of planning for and promoting mentoring programs that account for power differentials and enhance adult learning and development within mentoring are discussed.*

Mentoring as learning relationships have been mostly unquestioningly and uncritically accepted as a positive method to promote learning in the workplace, advance careers, help new employees learn workplace culture, and provide developmental and psychological support. Many definitions of mentoring, such as that by Daloz (1986), who proposes that mentors may act as “interpreters of the environment” (p. 207), reflect the notion that mentors help their protégés understand the contexts in which they find themselves. However, in the real world of organizations and educational institutions, persons who serve as mentors may primarily be members of dominant and/or hegemonic groups within organizations or institutions. Because of this, potential protégés, particularly those considered “other” by virtue of the intersection of gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, age, or sexual orientation, may experience difficulties initiating and participating in informal mentoring relationships. In addition, issues of power and interests within organizations or institutions might hamper the mutual attraction that is required to participate in an informal mentoring relationship (Hansman, 2000, 2001).

Although research and literature describing mentoring relationships and programs may depict the benefits and processes of both formal and informal mentoring relationships and programs, unexplored until recently (see for example, Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2001; Colley, 2002, 2003) are in-depth examinations of the power relationships that exist between mentors and protégés within mentoring relationships, how these power relationships may affect learning within mentoring relationships, and how mentoring programs may encourage the continual replication of hegemonic culture within organizations. In other words, whose needs are being met, the organization’s, mentor’s or the protégé’s? Thus the problem this paper seeks to address is the gap in the research and literature concerning marginalization and ultimately, differential of power within mentoring relationships. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore mentoring research, literature and models of mentoring from the fields of adult education, general education, and human resource development, examining issues of power and democracy in mentoring within this literature. Through inquiry into mentoring research, literature and frameworks, a critical perspective of mentoring which addresses issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, age, or sexual orientation as they are played out in mentoring relationships and programs in organizations and educational institutions. Finally, ways of planning for and promoting mentoring programs that account for power differentials and enhance adult learning and development for all groups of people are discussed.

Literature of Mentoring

Mentoring relationships have been long defined by myths (Colley, 2002). Perhaps the most acknowledged root of the ideas and definitions surrounding the concept of mentor is the well-known story from Greek mythology: Odysseus, leaving for battle, asked his female friend, the goddess of wisdom Athena, to take on the male form of Mentor to watch and guide his son Telemachus while he was away. Thus, a name was given for beneficial people in our lives, and the themes encompassing mentors as helpful teachers were brought into consciousness. These conceptions of mentors have continued through the centuries and are reflected in the many definitions of mentors and in expectations of mentoring relationships (Hansman, 2002).

Early research (i.e., Levinson et al. 1978) and models (i.e., Roche 1979) for mentoring were based largely on white males, or it was assumed that the gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, age, or sexual orientation of either mentors or protégés were not significant and therefore did not affect the quality of the interaction between mentor and protégés. Other longstanding research (for example, Kram & Isabella, 1985; Merriam, 1983) suggests two major types of mentoring relationships: informal, where protégés and mentors form a relationship based on mutual interests, or formal mentoring programs, which are usually structured by organizations and involve a more controlled company sponsored mentor/protégé matching process. Because informal mentoring relationships may be unavailable to members of historically marginalized groups, formal mentoring programs created by organizations have become a panacea to provide opportunities for mentoring, to achieve racial balance among executives, and to foster workplace learning. In spite of organizational good intentions, however, many formal mentoring programs planned by organizations are unsuccessful and fail to remove barriers to advancement for marginalized groups (Thomas, 2001). Consequently, formal mentoring programs may not address the individual needs of the protégés, but instead reflect the power and interests inherent within organizations, and the interests of the organization may be served at the cost of employee or human interests (Hansman, 2000; Bierema 2000; Thomas 2001).

Marginality and issues of power may affect how protégés and mentors interact and negotiate their relationships, both internally and externally, and ultimately affect the success of formal mentoring programs. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2001, 2002) discuss mentoring as occurring on two dimensions: the internal dimension, which is the relationship between the mentor and protégé, and the external aspect that encompasses the mentoring pair and the sponsoring or host organization. Within both the internal and external dimensions, mentoring is a socially constructed power relationship, and the power that mentors have and exercise within mentoring relationships can be helpful or hurtful to protégés. The nature of mentoring relationships is that protégés have less power and may be vulnerable to the whims of their mentors and of the dominant culture within the sponsoring organization. For mentoring relationships to be successful and helpful to protégés, open discussions and negotiations of power and interests must take place among mentors, protégés, and the organizations in which mentoring relationships occur. However, as research has shown, this may not always be the case.

Marginalization and Mentoring

Research shows that cross-race/cross-gender mentoring relationships can be problematic for protégés who are minorities. For example, African Americans may receive less psychosocial mentoring from cross-race mentors than they do from same-race mentors. People of color may perceive European American mentors as less helpful than a mentor of color (Harris 1999). Thomas (2001) found, some cross-race/cross-gender relationships can be positive relationships.

But as much as Thomas (2001) found supportive cross-race and cross-gender relationships in his study, he recognizes that there are problems with them. Potential European American mentors may hold negative stereotypical images about minority protégés and withhold needed support until the minority protégé has proven him or herself worth the investment. This covert racism may explain why European Americans in Thomas' study were placed on the fast track based on their perceived potential whereas "people of color had to display a proven and sustained record of solid performance—in effect, they often had to be overprepared—before they were placed on the executive track" (p. 104).

Even or perhaps especially in academe, cross-race/cross-gender mentoring relationships may be problematic. Brinson and Kottler's (1993) research describes faculty of color who are protégés of European American faculty mentors are encouraged to participate in service activities related to ethnic issues but are not informed of or encouraged to apply for research grants, engage in professional development activities, or participate in other academic opportunities that would help the protégés during their tenure/promotion process. Since service activities do not usually count as much toward tenure as academic and scholarly pursuits, in essence the faculty members of color are not being helped toward achieving tenure in the university. This is an example of how mentors may exercise their power to guide (or not guide) protégés through political quagmires of organizations or educational institutions, reflecting the power mentors have to determine successful outcomes for their protégés.

Power in Mentoring Relationships

Traditional mentoring relationships are hierarchical, composed of one experienced person who advises a less experienced person or persons. Freire, Fraser, Macedo, McKinnon, and Stokes (1997), in their examination of mentors and protégés, explain that in this traditional view the mentor (teacher) is presumed to know everything and the protégé (learner) little or nothing. The mentor's role—to "fill up" the protégé with knowledge"—denies the validity of the ontological and epistemological productions of the learner and the learner's community. This is authoritarian, manipulative, 'banking' pedagogy, which negates the possibility of democracy and distorts the lived experiences of the learners who are silenced and denied the opportunity to be authors of their own histories" (pp. xiv-xv). Freire et al. promote the idea of "democratic substance" and ethical democracy in mentoring relationships (p. xv), in which the mentor is prepared to dialogue and offer his or her insights, not through a banking approach, but through respecting their protégés, not forcing them to be passive receivers of knowledge but as a "position of agent, of cognizing subject. As such the learner is not a subordinate to the teacher or mentor, but a participant in a dialogic exploration toward knowing and understanding" (pp. xv-xvi).

Business organizations and educational institutions do not exist independently of the outside world. They mirror the changing culture and uncertainty of our times. Mentoring programs within these organizations reflect society; thus, they must continually accommodate a changing world. In describing mentoring relationships, Ragins (1997) combines psychological and sociological definitions of power and defines power as the "influence of one person over others, stemming from an individual characteristic, an interpersonal relationship, a position in an organization, or from membership in a societal group" (p. 485). Mentoring relationships involve two kinds of power: one internal to the relationship and existing between mentor and protégé, and one external to the relationship that reflects the power dynamics of the organization. The micro dynamics of the mentor/protégé relationship are sensitive to the larger organizations in

which they reside; therefore, they are “influenced by the macro dynamics of intergroup power relationships in organizations...resulting in subtle or dramatic shifts in power relations among groups in organizations” (p. 487).

Mentoring relationships can also be characterized as socially constructed power relationships that are designed to advantage certain groups while disadvantaging other groups. For instance, mentors can be considered “superior” by virtue of their phenomenal knowledge and their main task could be seen as passing on to or “filling up” their protégés with this knowledge. Mentors may function within a framework of power relations that “assumes that one person knows what is best for the other, has superior knowledge and skills and is perceived as somewhat paternalistic in his [sic] interactions” (Brinson and Kottler 1993, p. 241) with protégés. The power mentors have and exercise within mentoring relationships can be helpful or hurtful, and mentors may exercise power through the assumptions they make about their protégé. Perhaps the chief paradox surrounding mentoring relationships is that although mentors seek to “empower” their protégés, the relationships themselves are entrenched with power issues. Thus mentoring relationships involve the negotiation of power and interests of all involved, including mentors, protégés, and sponsoring organizations or institutions. Protégés may learn (or not) to command resources and thus gain power within organizations; the gain (or loss) of power is reflected onto the mentor by the protégé’s performance, resulting in positive (or negative) recognition among colleagues. However, few studies or mentoring models reflect the realities of the entrenched power issues—and adult educators must address these issues to plan programs that address the needs of all involved (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 1996, 2001).

Implications for Adult Education

Power issues within and without the relationship affect mentoring relationships. To ignore these dynamics of power is to fail to understand completely and address the internal and external influences of protégés, mentors, and the contexts in which they live. It seems clear that mentoring cannot be reduced to simple formulas or models, and further, that mentoring relationships are not a universal remedy for historically marginalized groups. Nor is mentoring a politically neutral or power-free process. Mentoring programs and relationships may reflect the power and interests of the organization and not the always the interests of the mentors and protégés. Power is inherent in organizational life and should be an ethical concern for those in a position to plan mentoring programs within organizations.

We live in a constantly changing world that is reflected in our personal and professional lives. Workplaces no longer provide lifelong jobs; work settings are continually being transformed by new technology. As workplaces change, flatter organizational structures become the norm, and jobs are reengineered or downsized. Senior employees are being encouraged or forced into early retirement, therefore, less “experienced” employees within organizations are available to serve as mentors. Despite all this turmoil and change, however, mentoring programs are increasing in workplaces, perhaps as a way to offer some kind of security in insecure times. So what should mentoring look like in the dawn of the 21st century and beyond? Darwin (2000) advocates the ideas of mentoring circles and peer mentoring to promote diversity and the notion of “non-hierarchical, democratic relationships” (p. 207). Her ideas are echoed by Higgins and Kram (2001), who propose a “Developmental Network Perspective” (p. 268) for mentoring that would include multiple dyadic and networked relationships that are intra- and extra-organizational and involve mutuality and reciprocity between and among members. Gunn (1995) advocates “democratic” mentoring programs, such as that run at CSX Corporation. This

mentoring program is not administered by the company's human resource department but is instead run as a grassroots program through the participation of employees. It is employee driven; the employee participants decide the goals and objectives for the program.

Perhaps the answer to some of the concerns about marginalization, power, and cross-race/cross-gender mentoring is for organizations to address these issues through training sessions when they plan and implement formal mentoring programs. By focusing on issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability, and sexual orientation during mentor training and orientation sessions, mentors may learn to understand the importance of providing developmental help and support to forge helpful cross-race/cross-gender mentoring relationships. European American mentors need to develop an appreciation for the obstacles women and people of color face and understand that they may need to be sensitive to these obstacles as they mentor their protégés. They can increase their credibility with their protégés by being more culturally responsive. Models such as Harris' (1999) Africentric paradigm of mentoring might be examined and adopted in order to facilitate more holistic and mutual mentoring among cross-race/cross-gender groups.

Another important power issue inherent in mentoring relationships is that protégés will simply become replicas of their mentors and uncritically accept their mentors' and their organizations' or institutions' cultural norms and values. Protégés should be encouraged to examine critically the advice they receive from their mentors, and mentors and protégés should also explore the cultural practices and norms at play in the organizations or institutions in which they work. Especially as mentoring relationships fade, protégés should be encouraged to test their own ideas and concepts that may be different from those of their mentors and their organizations. Negotiation between mentors and protégés becomes an important aspect of fading mentoring relationships.

Knowledge should be viewed as socially constructed by mentors and protégés in negotiation with each other and others, not as something to be "handed out" or to "fill up" the protégés. Key questions that should stay in the forefront of planning for mentoring programs include: Whose interests are primarily being served through mentoring programs, the organizations or institutions, the mentor's or the protégé's? Whose interests should be served? Can and should mentoring programs challenge unequal power relationships and institutional structures or simply reinforce existing hegemonic culture? How do those who were historically excluded from positions of power within an organization because of gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, or sexual orientation contribute to and recreate organizational cultures and mentoring programs that do not replicate hegemonic cultures of the past? Perhaps most importantly for adult educators, however, are foregrounding the questions of who benefits and who should benefit (Cervero & Wilson, 2001) in planning all mentoring programs in whatever contexts.

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