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EXPLORING ISSUES OF POWER IN FORMAL MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to explore how power manifests within mentoring relationships that purport to reduce power distances and move away from traditional hierarchical models of mentoring towards reciprocal methods of mentorship. The roundtable will be a discussion of how power presents and can be proactively addressed in mentoring relationships.

Keywords: Mentoring, power, privilege, relationships

Mentoring within organizations offers numerous benefits including developmental support to members, decreased turnover rates, and increased commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance (Burdett, 2014; Hezlett & Gibson, 2005; Yukl, 2013). A growing body of research explores mentoring strategies used to promote egalitarian organizations and decrease power distance, these include peer mentoring, relational mentoring, and reciprocal mentoring (Jackson, et al., 2014; Stephenson, 2014). A related stream of research critically explores issues of power in mentoring relationships (Brown et al., 2008, Hansman, 2002; Minnett et al., 2019; Ragins, 1997). Yet, research is scarce on efforts to minimize power differentials when real power differences exist within mentoring relationships.

The purpose of this project is to explore how power manifests within mentoring relationships that purport to reduce power distances and move away from traditional hierarchical models of mentoring towards a reciprocal method of mentorship. The roundtable will be a discussion of how power presents and can be proactively addressed in mentoring relationships. The presenters will begin the conversation sharing reflections on experiences with power, how power was used in mentoring relationships, and if it was acknowledged. Presenters will then invite the participants to share their observations on power in mentoring.

Previous literature addressing power in mentoring in adult education has noted the ways that race and gender identities inform mentoring relationships (Johnson-Bailey & Cevero, 2004; Seepersad et al., 2016) and argues that talking about issues of power and privilege are an essential component of healthy mentoring relationships. Conversely, failure to attend to power and privilege can lead to privileged mentors making damaging statements to protegees (Bell, 2021). Yet, scant attention is paid to how dynamics of power and privilege surface within these framings of reciprocal and relational mentorship. Instead, research focuses on negative actions within mentoring relationships which have deleterious effects such as distancing and manipulative behaviour, sabotage, and credit-taking (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2019) without any consideration of the role of power and privilege. Power is not required to have negative consequences for the mentee or mentoring relationship but how power is manifested should be acknowledged and critiqued.

Recent theorizing within the critical race theory tradition has sought to foreground discussion of power in mentoring relationships. Vargas et al. (2020) argued that power should be examined in terms of institutional systems, socio-history, social-political systems, dominant group phenomenology, marginalized group phenomenology, and interpersonal discourse during the development of formal mentoring programs. However, mentoring dyads might reflect on power or ignore power in the relationship. This systematic neglect of the manifestation of power risks allowing negative and harmful aspects of power to be reproduced unchecked in the mentoring relationship leading to damaging outcomes—particularly for the mentee. While we recognize that formally addressing issues of power does not free mentoring dyads from socially and historically constructed power dynamics, we take inspiration from Johnson-Bailey & Cervero's (2004) argument that regularly discussing power and privilege can allow mentoring dyads to transcend barriers they impose.

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