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## Marginal Mentoring in the Contact Space: Diversified Mentoring Relationships at a Midsized Midwestern State University (MMSU)

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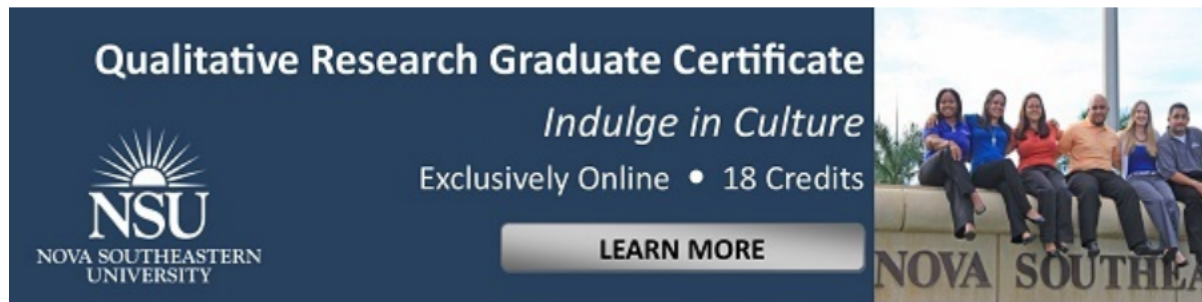
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## Marginal Mentoring in the Contact Space: Diversified Mentoring Relationships at a Midsized Midwestern State University (MMSU)

### Abstract

This study is a collaborative investigation that melds traditional qualitative social scientific and contemporary autoethnographic methods to examine diversified mentoring relationships at a midsized midwestern state university (MMSU). The first author conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with MMSU faculty members and professional personnel who were members of underrepresented minority (URM) groups. A thematic analysis of the data, informed by the literature on developmental relationships and intergroup communication, reveals a number of problems with MMSU's formal mentoring program and intergroup communication climate. Moreover, the findings indicate that the quality of mentoring relationships affects protégés' co-cultural communication practices. The second author, who is also a participant in the project, interjects her personal reflections about diversified mentoring relationships throughout the analysis. Together, the authors give voice to participants' suggestions to improve the quality of mentoring that occurs in MMSU's contact space and explore the implications of the findings for future research about diversified mentoring relationships.

### Keywords

Diversified Mentoring, Developmental Relationships, Intergroup Communication

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## **Marginal Mentoring in the Contact Space: Diversified Mentoring Relationships at a Mid-sized Midwestern State University (MMSU)**

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### **An Outsider Looking In**

Initially, my goal for this study was to explore the extent to which diversified mentoring relationships have helped underrepresented minority (URM) faculty members at a European American-dominated institution overcome barriers in order to become successful members of the university community. Idealistically, I thought that the findings could be used to promote positive social change at MMSU (e.g., enhancing the campus climate supporting diversity and promoting the retention of minority faculty members). I had conversations with the Associate Provost for Diversity about posting narratives on our university's website. As I began to select my sample, I realized just how difficult it was to identify URM faculty: The university's system for stratifying faculty and staff by race/ethnicity aggregates international faculty members and URM faculty members who come from the US. As I engaged in conversations with my respondents, I learned that most of the individuals with whom I spoke had not had positive mentoring relationships. I found that the majority of people would only tell their stories if I guaranteed them confidentiality. Although I still hope that the findings of this project will be used to effect positive social change in my community, I realize that this type of innovation can only occur if there is open dialogue about existing problems and an institutional commitment to address the issues that are raised. Thus, I have revised the primary goal for this study: to give voice to my participants as they describe the problems that they encountered with their mentors and offer suggestions to improve the quality of mentoring at MMSU. In order to accomplish this goal, I invited one of the participants to co-author this paper with me. Given that she is a female African American assistant professor in a diversified mentoring relationship with a White male professor, her intragroup standpoint

will offer in-depth insight into the lived experiences of the individuals who participated in these interviews. Throughout the paper, my co-author's comments are italicized to indicate her unique voice.

A secondary goal of my study is to address what I perceive to be some limitations of the mentoring literature in the discipline of Communication Studies. As I immersed myself in the literature, I realized that most of the existing theory and research about mentoring is based on the mentoring experiences of European Americans. One exception is a 1991 *Communication Education* article by Kalbfleisch and Davies that surveyed 26 Black data systems analysts. The authors found that race had "a significant impact in mentoring relationships involving blacks" and that "the race of the mentor was the best predictor of the mentoring relationship from both the perspective of the mentor and the protege" (p. 270). Although the goal of the study was simply to describe the demographic composition of mentoring dyads, the authors did note that, "racial issues in mentoring must be studied in more depth for a complete understanding of the process" (p. 271). Surprisingly, no one in the discipline seems to have picked up the challenge that Kalbfleisch and Davies issued nearly twenty years ago. Therefore, the secondary goal of this study is to explore the racial dynamics of mentoring relationships.

A cursory examination of the extant literature about diversified mentoring relationships demonstrates that it is a well established area of inquiry in the disciplines of psychology and management (see Ragins & Kram, 2007 for a recent review); I believe that extending this line of inquiry into the area of intergroup communication has the potential to generate new insight. Moreover, given that most of the empirical research on diversified mentoring relationships relies upon survey research methods (see Ragins, 1999a, for a treatment of methodological issues), applying qualitative methodology, particularly autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), has the potential to refine and extend extant theory and research. Toward this end, I present the following qualitative investigation of marginal mentoring in the contact space.

In the following paper, I provide the reader with a brief review of the literature about diversified mentoring and intergroup communication. Next, I describe my methodological choices and the constraints I faced as I gathered my data from faculty members and professional personnel who were URM faculty members at MMSU. Next, I report the findings of a thematic analysis of the data, which revealed a number of problems with MMSU's formal mentoring program. My coauthor elaborates on her lived experience related to the findings. Finally, we explore the practical and theoretical implications of the findings for future policy and research about diversified mentoring relationships.

## Review of the Literature

**Diversified mentoring relationships.** Twenty five years ago, Kathy Kram's (1988) qualitative investigation of workplace mentoring relationships provided scholars in the fields of psychology, management, education, and communication with a framework for studying the benefits of mentoring, or developmental relationships, with respect to the protégé, mentor, and organization. As Kram demonstrated, organizational members who receive career and psychosocial support from senior colleagues are more likely to enjoy higher levels of success and job satisfaction than those who do not receive such support. However, as Kram noted, her findings primarily reflected the experience of female protégés and male mentors: "There was only one female mentor in the study and no male managers identified female senior managers as their mentor" (p. 5).

Over the next two decades, a plethora of quantitative studies investigated sex differences in mentoring relationships (see Ragins, 1999b, for a comprehensive and methodologically savvy review; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007, for an updated review). According to Ragins (1999b), the effects of gender [*sic*] on mentoring are inconclusive: Some studies (e.g., Noe, 1988, as cited by Ragins, 1999b) found that female protégés reported receiving more psychosocial support from their mentors than did male protégés; other studies (e.g., Koberg, Boss, Chappel, & Ringer, 1994, as cited by Ragins, 1999b) found that male protégés reported more career development functions than did their female counterparts; still other studies (e.g., Turban & Dougherty, 1994, as cited by Ragins, 1999b) found no significant differences in either psychosocial or career functions. McKeen and Bujaki echoed Ragins' conclusions, citing one additional study that examined mentors' perceptions of the mentoring functions that they provided to protégés: Allen and Eby (2004, as cited by McKeen & Bujaki) found that male mentors provided more career mentoring functions, whereas female mentors provided more psychosocial functions. However, as Ragins noted (and McKeen & Bujaki reiterated), "one question that arises when viewing the research on gender and reports of mentoring is whether these reports are influenced by social desirability or self-perceptions related to gender" (p. 351). Clearly, future mentoring research should employ alternative data-gathering techniques, rather than relying solely on survey research methods.

In contrast to the abundant research that explores sex differences in mentoring relationships, relatively few scholars have examined the racial dynamics of mentoring relationships: Of those, David Thomas (1990) and Belle Rose Ragins (1997) have produced particularly insightful works. Thomas' seminal study on the impact of race on mentoring relationships, which surveyed 88 Black and 107 White managers, found that mentoring relationships tend to be homophilous for White protégés, whereas Black protégés form most of their mentoring relationships with Whites. In the same study, Thomas found that same-race relationships provided significantly higher levels of psychosocial support than did cross-race relationships. In 1993, Thomas conducted a qualitative investigation of the dynamics of cross-race developmental relationships among 22 African American and White mentors and protégés. In particular, Thomas was interested in examining people's strategies for communicating about racial issues. He found that the extent to which mentors and protégés agreed about communication strategies (i.e., whether to openly discuss racial differences or to suppress or deny them) influenced relationship quality, such that greater complementarity resulted in more supportive relationships.

Ragins (1997) extended Thomas' (1990, 1993) work on racial differences to develop a new framework for studying mentoring relationships. She conceptualized this framework as a "power perspective" on "diversified mentoring relationships," which consist of "mentors and protégés who differ on one or more group memberships associated with power in organizations" (p. 489). By creating this framework, Ragins positioned race as one of many demographic variables (i.e., ethnicity, gender, class, disability, sexual orientation) that inform individuals' social positioning in organizations. She argued that mentoring relationships are influenced by the dynamics of intergroup power relations, generating seven propositions that explored the effects of homogeneity and heterogeneity in dyad composition on protégé and mentor outcomes. For protégés, she argued that homogeneous relationships would produce stronger role modeling and psychosocial effects; that protégés who have majority mentors would receive the highest levels of career development support; and that homogeneous majority relationships would produce optimal protégé outcomes. With respect to mentors, Ragins posited that diversified relationships would produce the greatest increase in knowledge, empathy, and diversity-related skills, as well as the highest levels of performance in heterogeneous work groups; that minority mentors in homogeneous relationships would

experience the highest levels of generativity and fulfillment; and that majority mentors in homogeneous relationships would receive the greatest amount of positive peer recognition.

**Intergroup communication.** As Harwood (2010) recently observed, Allport's 1954 intergroup contact theory is arguably one of the most interesting and heuristically valuable ideas in the past 50 years of social science research (p. 147). Although contact can take place in a variety of contexts, the area of face-to-face contact may be most salient to mentoring relationships. As Harwood noted, extensive reviews of the literature on face-to-face intergroup contact exist (e.g., Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Wagner, Tropp, Finchilescu, & Tredoux, 2008), so there is no need for an exhaustive review here. In general, the empirical literature supports Allport's hypothesis that cooperative contact among equal status participants, supported by authorities, in pursuit of common goals is conducive to shaping positive intergroup attitudes and reducing negative stereotypes. As Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (as cited by Harwood) commented, some sort of intervention is typically required in order to meet all of Allport's conditions. Ideally, formal mentoring relationships would satisfy these conditions, albeit for the fact that participants are rarely of equal status because they have different levels of seniority. However, drawing from Ragins' conceptualization of diversified mentoring relationships, it may be impossible to find a mentor and protégé who are of equal status. In addition, as Scandura's (1998) critical review of the literature suggested and Ragins, Cotton, and Miller's (2000) survey of 1,162 employees confirmed, many mentoring relationships can be characterized as marginal or dysfunctional. If, as Harwood pointed out, contact also has the potential to reinforce stereotypes and negative attitudes, then a marginal or dysfunctional diversified mentoring relationship could actually widen the gap that it was intended to narrow. In particular, dysfunctional mentoring experiences might result in co-cultural communicative practices (Camara & Orbe, 2010; Orbe, 1998) that promote separation. This line of reasoning leads me to pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How do protégés in diversified mentoring relationships characterize the quality of the mentoring that they have received at MMSU?

RQ2: How do protégés in diversified mentoring relationships characterize the state of intergroup relations at MMSU?

RQ3: How does the quality of diversified mentoring relationships affect protégés' co-cultural communication practices?

## **Methods**

**Context.** MMSU is a European American-dominated institution located in a mid-sized midwestern city. Currently, the university is engaged in a strategic planning process that seeks to promote diversity in its community. The university's diversity committee recently identified mentoring as one means by which the university can retain URM faculty.

**Methodology.** This study is rooted in the interpretive-critical paradigm. As such, we embrace the subjective nature of our participants' and our own ways of knowing. Consistent with standpoint theorists (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1991), we acknowledge that our interpretations are rooted in our social positioning; therefore, self-reflexivity is an essential part of our analysis. In response to Carillo Rowe (2000), who challenged scholars to "find ways to examine, undefensively, how Whiteness both privileges and contains them" (p. 77), we examine how our intergroup and intragroup standpoints influence our experiences and interpretations of diversified mentoring relationships. As critical scholars, we seek to effect

positive social change. In the tradition of social justice research (Frey, 2000), we strive to involve ourselves in the life of “another,” as opposed to studying “an other” (p. 162). Towards this end, the principal investigator and participant/co-investigator formed a collaborative partnership. Through this partnership, we strive to minimize the power distance between researcher and researched.

This study employed both traditional qualitative and contemporary autoethnographic methods. Specifically, the first author engaged in qualitative interviewing and the second author conducted an autoethnography. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain, “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). By combining the researchers’ own experiences along with those of the other participants in a reflexive ethnography (Ellis, 2008), we can bridge not only the personal and the cultural, but also the personal and the political (Holman Jones, 2005).

**Participants and procedures.** After securing Institutional Review Board approval, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews about diversified mentoring relationships with minority faculty members and professional personnel at MMSU. Network and snowball sampling were used to identify 31 potential participants who were current or retired MMSU faculty members and professional personnel who were also members of underrepresented ethnic minority groups. Two potential participants moved away during the course of the study and seven chose not to participate. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the remaining 23 people in order to elicit their narratives about diversified mentoring relationships. One question that I asked was, “What types of challenges did you encounter as a \_\_\_\_\_ (describe social positioning) at MMSU? Did your mentor help you overcome any of those challenges? If so, how?” Interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes in length; each transcribed interview was approximately 10 pages long, resulting in a total of more than 200 pages of single-spaced text. Once I transcribed each interview, I emailed the text to the respondent, who verified its accuracy.

Two of the participants who were initially identified as members of underrepresented ethnic minority groups self-identified as international faculty members, so I removed them from the sample. The remaining 21 participants ranged in age from 33 to 82 with a mean age of 47. One participant chose not to disclose his age. The sample consisted of ten African Americans, three Native Americans, two Asian Americans, one Mexican American, one Hispanic, and two individuals who identified as biracial. As Orbe and Drummond (2009) noted, these commonly used racial and ethnic labels reflect essentialist categories. Although many of my participants used these labels to describe their social positioning, others eschewed labels in favor of multiple names: For example, two participants (one African American; one Latina) had spent part of their childhood living overseas, so they identified both as Americans and as international faculty. There were 15 females and 6 males; 14 faculty members and 7 professional personnel. Five of the faculty members were tenured; six were tenure-track; two were contract; and one was retired. Half of the professional personnel were also tenured faculty; the other half were contract. Years of service ranged from 2 to 49, with an average of 16 years.

**Analysis.** I conducted a thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Owen, 1984) of the data, paying special attention to statements about the quality of mentoring relationships that respondents had experienced and the state of intergroup relations at MMSU. I then compared these statements to concepts identified in the literature about diversified mentoring and intergroup communication (e.g., Orbe, 1998; Ragins, 1997; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), paying particular attention to comments that pertained to the quality of mentoring relationships and intergroup relations, as well as to co-cultural communicative practices. The following observations and summary recommendations, grouped by theme and ordered by

frequency, were generated from respondents' narratives. My co-author offers her insight into these developed themes from the perspective of an untenured African American female in a diversified mentoring dyad. Her voice, indicated by italicized font, articulates an intragroup standpoint, providing an authentic vantage point that I am unable to access, due to my social positioning as an outsider looking in.

## Results

**The quality of mentoring relationships.** Approximately half of the respondents had participated in formal mentoring relationships, in which they were paired with a senior colleague or supervisor. All of those mentoring relationships could be characterized as diversified mentoring relationships because minority mentees were paired with majority mentors. Two thirds of relationships were heterogeneous in terms of both race and sex; one third of relationships were heterogeneous in terms of race only. With respect to RQ1, one third of those who were formally mentored characterized the quality of the mentoring that they received as good or excellent; the other two thirds described their mentoring experiences as marginal or dysfunctional. Good mentors were those who helped their mentees by providing them with social, informational, and career-related support. Marginal mentors were those who met with their mentees only once or twice and did not actively seek them out or help them in any meaningful way. Dysfunctional mentors were those who gave poor advice or failed to offer support to their mentees when it was needed. Almost all respondents who described their formal mentoring relationships as marginal or dysfunctional reported that they subsequently found informal mentors to meet their needs.

Most of those who stated that they had not experienced formal mentoring relationships came to MMSU over 25 years ago, before there was a formal mentoring program at the university. Three faculty members who came to MMSU within the last decade as contract faculty members reported that they had never been formally assigned mentors. Most of the respondents who were not assigned formal mentors reported that they eventually found informal mentors by themselves: Many of these mentors were in supervisory roles, although some were senior colleagues within the mentee's department; others worked in a different area of the university; still others were entirely outside of the university. Most internal informal mentoring relationships were diversified mentoring relationships, but tended to be heterogeneous in terms of race only. In contrast, almost all external informal mentoring relationships were homogeneous in terms of race and sex.

**The state of intergroup relations.** With respect to RQ2, respondents made a number of comments that pertained to the state of intergroup relations at MMSU: In general, these comments referred to socialization/climate issues. The majority of respondents discussed challenges that they had related to networking and assimilation into the community. Most respondents acknowledged that one of the biggest challenges about coming to MMSU was the lack of diversity and the difficulty connecting with other people in their ethnic/racial group. As one Mexican American respondent said, "I don't even know if I'm the only one on this campus. I doubt it, but I sure don't see a lot of us out there. I don't know." Similarly, a Hispanic respondent asked, "Are there more minority faculty members at MMSU than there were in 1984? If there are, you don't notice them." In addition, an Asian American respondent laughingly said, "There just aren't a lot of 'my people' around." Echoing these respondents, the second author added,

*I had often wondered if there were other African American female professors on campus. I had heard of an African American professor who taught in another college. During a casual conversation I was having with my*



*department chair, I asked him if he knew of this professor. His response was, "She is a trouble maker and you need to be careful who you are spending time with." Being fearful of any negative ramifications, I did not attempt to make contact with her.*

Respondents perceived that mentors had the potential to ameliorate the lack of diversity at MMSU. In particular, participants encouraged mentors to understand their mentee's need to connect with similar others and to offer to introduce their mentees to diverse others who are well connected in the community. As one Asian American woman stated, "I would suggest being a little bit more sensitive to a younger professor's personal needs. It's more than knowing how to publish—it's also creating a sense of home where you live—which, in this town, is not easy." As the second author observed,

*When I first arrived on campus, I did not know how isolated I would be, given that I was moving into a new living and working community. As a result, it was not until I had been at the university for a year that the newness wore off and the reality of being the "only one" set in. During the course of the year, my mentor never asked me how I was doing or if I needed anything. His questions were always related to my research or teaching. I don't think that it ever occurred to him that I was struggling emotionally in terms of feeling like I had a true place at this university.*

Another respondent, a Latina, echoed this sentiment: "Make sure you provide social support. Introduce him or her to people. Make a party and at least one welcoming dinner so that this new faculty can meet people." However, one Mexican American cautioned mentors not to assume that their mentees would want to join a group based on their race/ethnicity. In addition, one African American respondent advised mentors not to tell their mentees that there are certain racist or sexist people on campus whom they should avoid, as doing so might bias future interactions with those individuals.

Another issue that respondents identified pertained to serving as the "diversity expert" in their department or college. Several respondents discussed the need to protect minority faculty from being overwhelmed with committee assignments and student advising. As one African American respondent reflected,

*I was put on every committee that could possibly have any connection to my department, knowing nothing. So of course, I'm a body. (Laughter.) And after awhile, it begins to show: There is nothing I can contribute to these organizations. I think it was my mentor's way of showing how interested in diversity she was, without realizing the detriment to me personally.*

Although most respondents recognized that being overburdened with service was a significant barrier to earning promotion and tenure, some respondents found it difficult to follow their mentor's advice to become disengaged in service activities because they felt that the need to serve as an advocate and role model for minority students at MMSU was so great. In one African American woman's words:

*My first year, I was finishing up my Ph.D. and my mentor told me, "Don't work with student groups." Well, when you come to a campus like MMSU and you have students of color with no real mentor, saying, "Don't work with student groups," is like saying, "Go run in front of a car." I could not do that.*

The second author reframed her service burden in the following way:

*Although I recognize that working with students is a time commitment that is often a struggle, I feel as though I need to work with them. It allows for me to give back to all of those who have given to me. It also offers me an opportunity to connect with people who look like me. I feel good making a difference in people's lives.*

Respondents also noted that faculty members who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups routinely encounter prejudice and discrimination on the MMSU campus: From one African American woman's perspective, teaching involves not only conveying course subject matter, but also refuting negative stereotypes on a daily basis. Commenting on a racist incident that she asked me not to repeat, she said, "Understand that when you bring minority professors here, they're going to be doing much more than just what you're hiring them to do because it needs to be done." For faculty members who feel isolated and stressed by encounters with students' prejudice and discrimination, respondents underscored the importance of developing a support system and affiliating with like-experienced individuals. In order to address this issue, one Asian American respondent created a listserv for URM faculty who were interested in talking about diversity and teaching:

That's another way for me to get advice and just have some of my feelings normalized. It sounds very selfish, but in the process of talking to people at various conferences—they said, "We wish that we could find someone else." For those of us who are located in very isolated communities, we don't have anyone else to talk to about this. Many of them, myself included, just go home and talk to our partners. And our partners are sick of hearing this. (Laughter.) My partner said, "I'm just so tired of this. I'm fed up with these racist people." So, I just thought we needed a forum of other instructors to sort of bounce off ideas.

**The effects of diversified mentoring relationship quality on intergroup relations.** RQ3 asks how the quality of diversified mentoring relationships affects protégés' co-cultural communication practices. As stated previously, one third of respondents who had participated in formal mentoring relationships characterized the quality of the mentoring that they received as good or excellent; the other two thirds described their mentoring experiences as marginal or dysfunctional. In order to answer RQ3 in the most parsimonious manner possible, I juxtapose dysfunctional mentoring relationships with excellent mentoring relationships: Will those who have experienced dysfunctional mentoring relationships respond in ways that distance them from future intergroup relations at MMSU? In contrast, will those who experienced good or excellent mentoring respond in ways that promote intergroup relations at MMSU?

The respondents who experienced dysfunctional mentoring had had mentors who either gave them bad advice or who put their own interests ahead of their mentee's. Two African American women described instances in which their European American mentors had given them bad advice: The African American woman previously referred to as being overwhelmed by committee assignments at her mentor's behest describes her response in this way:

I could not deal with it and I realized that my contributions were not uh, in the academic tones that they wanted to have. Therefore, I became a recluse...When other people came along and wanted me to get involved in some of these things, I refused, and of course, signed my own death warrant. Uh, it got so bad that I decided I didn't need this anymore and turned in a resignation just after Christmas in 2007. Free, free at last. (Laughter.)

Her response to this dysfunctional mentoring experience clearly exemplifies avoidance (Orbe, 1998). A second African American female respondent who received bad advice described her mentor in this way: "I didn't think there was a lot of patience for me to come back for clarification. Later, I also realized that she gave me information that did not set me up for success." When I asked her whether she had sought an informal mentor when she realized that she wasn't getting what she wanted from her formal mentor, she talked about her choice to immerse herself in service to her church community:

I was hell-bent on service. The minute we landed here, we found a church, my family and I. We saw the need and the church was so excited to have a professor attending the church that they immediately began to fit me into slots with huge responsibilities. I didn't know how to say no...I think my mentor saw me heading over a cliff with the service thing; maybe she assumed that as an autonomous person, I was making a choice, even at my first or second year. But I didn't see that.

This excerpt reflects what Orbe (1998) referred to as intragroup networking. Although this woman found satisfaction in working with similar others who shared her religious identity, her choice had a negative impact on her progress toward tenure. Another respondent, a Native American man who also chose intragroup networking as a co-cultural communication strategy, had this to say about his mentor: "When there was a choice between supporting me or supporting themselves or surviving themselves, they chose themselves." In response to this situation, he found informal mentors in other Native American faculty, who were able to provide him with the type of nurturing that he needed. As he explained,

There's been a couple of situations where some individuals have made what I felt like were very insensitive comments about my Native American heritage. These individuals in my support group—I was able to commiserate and we talked about, "Yes, this is a form of racism." It's not like there's a solution to it, but it's nice to have acknowledgement: "Yes, we know what you're going through. We've experienced a similar thing."

The respondents who characterized their mentors as good or excellent gave numerous examples of the ways in which their mentors provided them with social, informational, and career-related support. Interestingly enough, two of the three success stories involved a Hispanic male mentee whose European American female mentor helped him succeed in a female-dominated work environment and a female African American mentee whose European American male mentor helped her succeed in a male-dominated department. The Hispanic male respondent described his mentor in this way: "She was always very supportive in every area—whether that be professionally, socially, or emotionally. She was great to work for and we never had any issues." Reflecting on his experience with intergroup relations at MMSU, he said, "It's been pretty good. I don't know that I've had any issues here, from a professional

standpoint, in regards to my race, at all.” However, he contrasted the positive experience that he has had on campus with problems that he has experienced in the surrounding community:

I’d say the MM community—it’s getting better, ‘cuz there’s more and more minorities and Hispanics here, as opposed to when I started back here in the 80s—but it’s still out there and you can feel it. It’s just simple things like—my daughter’s a cheerleader in high school—and there’s a school bus driver who was having a conversation with us once about how she pulled up in a parking lot and a Black man wouldn’t let her park where she wanted to—and I was like, “Why did you have to say it was a Black man? Why wasn’t it just this man who wouldn’t let you park?” But it was, “this ‘Black man’ who wouldn’t let me do what I wanted to do.” So, you hear comments like that all the time and if I do say something like, “You know, I’m a minority,” they’re like, “Well, we don’t think of you as a minority.” I’m like, “Sorry, I am.”

This excerpt clearly exemplifies educating others as a co-cultural communication strategy. A second respondent who embraced this strategy, a biracial man with Asian American and Caucasian ancestry, characterized his European American mentor as “wonderfully helpful: She has groomed me in many ways, pointed me toward opportunities—some of which I took; some of which I didn’t—she didn’t require me to pursue them.” Throughout his narrative, whenever I asked him questions about challenges that he had faced as a biracial man in MM City, he pointed out that he had not only experienced the “absence of problematic challenges,” but that he had also been “the beneficiary of privilege.” When I asked him to elaborate, he explained that he is automatically granted respect because of his male body, his speech patterns that reflect the dominant culture of academia, and his Caucasian appearance. In reframing my question about challenges to explore privileges that he had experienced, he challenged me to think critically about my assumptions related to race/ethnicity and discrimination/privilege. As a faculty fellow in the teaching development office, he commits to educating others by facilitating faculty workshops about diversity. His goal in these workshops is to encourage people to engage in retrospective sense making about a diversity-related interaction in which they were uncomfortable. He recounted:

The last time I did it, a woman cried during the seminar. I count that as going well. Not that that’s a goal: My goal is not to make people feel so bad that they cry, but that means it worked. It had the significant impact that I hoped for.

Clearly, this respondent is not afraid to engage in confrontational strategies in order to challenge dominant group members to examine co-cultural interactions from a critical perspective.

Finally, one respondent, an African American woman in a male-dominated department, stated that her European American mentor had been tremendously supportive: “We have been working closely together for the last three years and pretty much everything that I’ve published has been with him.” In addition to the career enhancement that he provided, she also referred to him as a friend: “I would say that the mentoring relationship has become somewhat of a friendship—as close of a friend as you can have when that person is a mentor and at the same time that person also has a key to your future in that, you know, at some point, they’ll be voting as to whether you’ll get tenure or not.” In addition to her insightful comment about the double-bind that mentors who are senior faculty within the same department as their tenure-track mentees face, she also expressed certain reservations about the differences in their social positioning:

He's a White guy, y'know? He's not a mother. He has children, but the things I have to balance vs. the things he has to balance are different: It's the difference between a male who is probably the head of his household and has got full and tenure—you know, a person who is there and a person who is struggling to get there. There are some things that I wouldn't even broach to him because I didn't think he would be able to understand.

Her comment invokes the co-cultural communicative strategy of averting controversy by avoiding certain topics with her mentor. Later, she also alluded to developing positive face: When I asked her if she had found someone else with whom she could broach those issues, she replied,

I would love to have a friend: somebody I could go to lunch with every day. But I don't have that. And I don't have the luxury and time to figure out who that person could be because that's just another can of worms. So, you settle for trying to connect with people in the department the best you can: being cordial, being polite, having some relationships within your department. I'd like to have a friend outside, but right now, I just can't afford that.

Her comment haunts me. I think about it all the time. I invited her to go out to lunch with me and collaborate as a co-author on this paper because I wanted to be her friend so badly—not to mention that she has a stronger background in intergroup relations than I. Although we did get to know each other a little bit over lunch, she informed me that she couldn't work with me: Ironically, her mentor had advised her not to. Apparently, her departmental promotion and tenure documents explicitly state that her publications and presentations must be presented in discipline-specific journals and conferences.

### **An Insider Gazing Back and Forth**

*Although the analysis is an accurate reflection of how I perceived my relationship with my mentor at that time, I have since had the opportunity to reflect on our relationship and what I believe to be the “truth” of that relationship as I perceive it today. One of the things that stand out for me is that I labeled him as a friend. I don't think that is a correct assessment of the relationship. I don't believe that we were or are friends or that he ever viewed me as a friend. In fact, I think that I was so eager to feel as though I had connected with someone (i.e., I felt so isolated that I wanted to have someone to label a friend), that I verbally and mentally mislabeled our relationship. I truly believe that in fact the mentoring relationship that I was in was one of self-gratification and manipulation on the part of my mentor due to the political nature of the department in which I work. The true nature of my relationship with my mentor did not surface until my 5<sup>th</sup> year review. During this year, my mentor was removed from the position of chair of the promotion and tenure committee. As a result of his removal from this position, I had to sit down with a person to whom I had never spoken regarding my place in the department. He shared with me things I did not know in terms of who determines tenure and promotion, as well as what kind of research I should actually be doing (i.e., conducting my own empirical research, rather than editing my mentor's latest textbook revision). As a result of that conversation, I*

*have become more engaged with people in my department, as well as with people in the university community. Those interactions have allowed for me to see the need to define my own career based on my own professional goals as they align themselves with my departmental expectations of tenure and promotion and not based on what one or two people tell me I should be doing.*

Faculty of color often struggle to balance departmental expectations, personal needs, and career goals, while trying not to “rock the boat” in terms of the political process of striving for tenure and promotion. As a result, faculty of color may choose to isolate themselves from socializing with individuals outside of their department in order to ensure that they are perceived as committed and focused on helping to maintain the department in which they work. The difficulty of connecting with other faculty from underrepresented groups may be exacerbated by departmental leaders and mentors who discourage junior faculty from seeking support from people outside of their department.

### Looking Forward Together

#### Discussion

**Summary.** With respect to RQ1, one third of those who were formally mentored characterized the quality of the mentoring that they received as good or excellent; the other two thirds described their mentoring experiences as marginal or dysfunctional. The respondents who characterized their mentors as good or excellent reported that their mentors provided them with social, informational, and career-related support. The respondents who described their mentors as marginal were those who met with them only once or twice and did not actively seek them out or help them in any meaningful way. The respondents who experienced dysfunctional mentoring had had mentors who either gave them bad advice or who put their own interests ahead of their mentee’s. These descriptions are consistent with Kram’s (1988) classic discussion of career and psychosocial mentoring functions and contemporary typologies of marginal, negative, and dysfunctional mentoring relationships (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Scandura, 1998).

With respect to RQ2, respondents made a number of comments that pertained to the state of intergroup relations at MMSU: In general, these comments pertained to socialization/climate issues. In particular, respondents acknowledged that one of the biggest challenges about coming to MMSU was the lack of diversity and the difficulty connecting with other people in their ethnic/racial group. Participants also raised concerns about being overburdened with diversity-related service. Moreover, they described routine encounters with prejudice and discrimination. These issues are similar to those raised by Allen’s (2000) Black feminist standpoint analysis of the socialization experience of Black women faculty and graduate students at predominantly White universities; Turner, Myers, and Creswell’s (1999) descriptions of the isolation and tokenism that faculty of color in the Midwest experience; and Johnson-Bailey’s (as cited in Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004) references to racism that she experienced as a Black faculty member in a classroom dominated by White students.

With respect to RQ3, the findings suggest that the quality of diversified mentoring relationships affect protégés’ co-cultural communication practices: Those who had experienced dysfunctional mentoring engaged in Orbe’s (1998) co-cultural communication strategies of avoidance and intragroup networking. In contrast, most respondents who characterized their mentors as good or excellent engaged in educating others or averting controversy. It would seem that dysfunctional mentoring relationships tend to promote separation, whereas effective mentoring relationships yield accommodation or assimilation. In

this way, dysfunctional diversified mentoring relationships may have a chilling effect on intergroup relations.

**Limitations and methodological implications.** This study has four fairly obvious shortcomings. First, as is the case with most qualitative research, the small sample size and non-probabilistic sampling methods reduce the generalizability of the findings. Second, the limited number of Native American, Asian American and Hispanic American participants precludes the possibility of making meaningful between-groups comparisons, while simultaneously increasing the difficulty of protecting participants' identities. The reason that the first author employed network and snowball sampling is that MMSU does not have a method for identifying URM faculty and professional personnel. Currently, minority and international faculty members are combined in the same racial/ethnic categories, although research indicates that their experiences differ significantly from one another (Howe, 2008; Thompson, 2008). Because there is no way to determine the number of minority faculty members at MMSU, it is impossible to estimate the extent to which this study's findings are generalizable to the larger population of minority faculty members on campus. If MMSU is truly committed to recruiting and retaining minority faculty members, then the institution has a responsibility to conduct more evidence-based research about their needs and experiences. In order to be able to explore between-groups differences that may exist, as well as to generalize the findings of such research with confidence, we need to be able to determine the extent of the population that we hope to better serve.

Third, the data are limited in that they reflect only the protégés' perceptions of diversified mentoring relationships. Because of this limitation, we can neither examine mentors' perceptions of the quality of mentoring that they gave, nor their perceptions of the state of intergroup relations at MMSU. As Ragins (1999a) noted, "it is advantageous to obtain data from both the mentor and the protégé" (p. 235). Indeed, co-cultural communication theory suggests that URM group members communicate and perceive communication differently than people from the dominant group (Orbe & Warren, 2000). As a result of these communication differences, two individuals may be involved in the same conversation; however, due to different standpoints, they may have different perspectives about what was communicated in the conversation. Orbe and Warren found that people from different cultural groups foster different perspectives of the same conflict. Future research should examine both mentors' and protégés' perceptions about diversified mentoring relationships and intergroup relations. One heuristic approach would be to extend Schipper's (2008) analysis of the structural and interpersonal dynamics of interracial mentoring to include both members of a diversified mentoring dyad.

Finally, the quality of the data and analysis may have been affected by our social positioning. As Best (2003) observed, Whiteness shapes and constrains the research process: The fact that the first author is European American may have influenced the extent to which the respondents felt comfortable sharing their diversified mentoring experiences with her. In addition, our standpoints unquestionably shaped our interpretations of the data. In order to address the first potential limitation, the first author enlisted the assistance of a senior colleague who is a prominent member of the African American community on campus. He helped her identify prospective participants and gave her permission to mention his name when she recruited individuals for the study. This study's high response rate (74%) is due in large part to his sponsorship. In addition, the first author invited the second author to co-author this paper. Her autoethnographic narrative, written from the standpoint of an untenured female African American assistant professor in a diversified mentoring relationship with a White male professor, both validates and enriches the existing data. With respect to the second limitation, the second author's social positioning provided unique insight into the analysis and discussion. Her position as an insider, gazing back and forth between her own

personal experience and the larger social context of diversified mentoring relationships and intergroup relations at MMSU afforded us a vantage point that enhanced the credibility of the analysis. However, it is important to recognize that this enhanced credibility does not come without risk: In the second author's words,

*I became a little nervous over the weekend. I turn in my P&T materials in October. I have to supply a hard copy of all my articles to the committee and if my mentor reads the article he will definitely vote "No" for me. Even though I know it's risky to put my story in print, I want to move forward with this publication. I have to stand in my truth.*

**Practical Implications.** Respondents generated a number of viable solutions for the problems that they identified. First, respondents reported significant difficulty connecting with other people in their ethnic/racial group. One respondent suggested that in order to facilitate networking between new and existing minority faculty members and professional personnel, the university could develop a listserv or a social networking site for faculty members and professional personnel who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups. This type of mechanism has the potential to provide social support for new minority faculty members who may feel marginalized in an institution that is dominated by European Americans. Alternatively, a number of respondents suggested finding a variety of mentors: an internal departmental mentor; an intermediate mentor from a different academic area in the university, with whom they may share racial/ethnic group membership; and an external mentor outside of the university, who can provide new faculty members with an outsider's perspective on the MMSU culture. Creating social networking opportunities such as coffee breaks, weekend social gatherings, and other informal opportunities to socialize that can occur during times that do not take away from departmental and class expectations can offer new faculty members support in a relaxed environment.

Second, a number of respondents noted challenges associated with serving as the "diversity expert" for their college or department and/or the designated advisor for all students of color: If mentors are willing to acknowledge that protégés who are overburdened with service face significant barriers to earning promotion and tenure, then those mentors ought to offer to help carry the service load. As one African American respondent so eloquently replied when a colleague accused her of "hoarding" the minority students:

I can't get any work done, because they are all in my office. You want them? Go get them. And let me tell you how to go get them. You need to reach out to them. Why would they come to you? Go get 'em. Take them to lunch. Talk to them about their work. Ask them questions. Please, take them off my hands. But do not come in here and accuse me of hoarding minority students.

For many faculty of color, working with students of color is a cultural expectation in which they often find joy. Mentors should recognize this phenomenon and support faculty of color when they take on the role of mentor. In addition, mentors can support their mentees who choose to immerse themselves in service, acting as their advocates: If their chairperson and members of the promotion and tenure committee do not understand the ramifications of being one of approximately 20 underrepresented minority faculty members on campus, the mentor can point out how much extra work the mentee does in role modeling, advising, refuting negative stereotypes, and serving as "the diversity expert" because of his or her social positioning.



**Theoretical implications.** What implications does this study have for extending extant theory about diversified mentoring relationships? First, although Ragins (1997) noted that diversity exists on a number of different dimensions, her propositions do not explicitly address interaction effects. As well as race and sex, future research about diversified mentoring relationships should explore the effects of variables such as class, able-bodiedness, able-mindedness, religion, and sexual orientation on organizational behaviors and outcomes for both mentors and protégés. As Schippers (2008) observed,

The accomplishment of difference is reflective, productive, and sometimes divergent of structural inequalities when, within interaction, people (1) accomplish difference in a way that raises the salience of that difference for defining the situation and (2) establish meanings that define that difference as a status hierarchy. (p. 77)

Future research should examine the discursive construction of diversified mentoring relationships, attending to the extent to which participants emphasize the primacy of some dimensions of difference over others. Can mentors and protégés engage in dialogue about race that avoids reifying essentialist categories (Orbe & Drummond, 2009) and perpetuating color blindness (Simpson, 2008)?

Second, most mentoring research is predicated upon the assumption that psychosocial and career-enhancing support lead to positive organizational outcomes for protégés. The experience of the African American woman who experienced “death by committee” indicates that well-intentioned advice may have negative unintended consequences for protégés. Although this type of mentoring behavior may not descend to the level of the dysfunctional mentoring relationships described by Scandura (1998), it does suggest that future research needs to explore the negative unintended consequences of mentoring behaviors that perpetuate tokenism.

Finally, how do mentors and protégés negotiate the tensions in their relationships? As Harwood (2010) noted, “The contact event is a bit of a black box—people disappear into it and emerge with altered attitudes. We know little about what they do during the contact itself” (p. 164). Although Orbe’s (1998) typology of co-cultural communication strategies offers a valuable framework with which to examine protégés’ responses to mentoring experiences, it would also be worthwhile to investigate how mentors and protégés negotiate tensions that occur in the contact space. Thomas (1993) explored the strategies that mentors and protégés use to talk about racial difference; however, his typology consists of only three communication behaviors: denial, suppression, and direct engagement. Future research needs to examine a wider repertoire of strategies that mentors and protégés employ to balance the tensions that they experience in diversified mentoring relationships.

**Conclusion.** This study has made a unique contribution to the communication discipline by exploring the racial dynamics of mentoring relationships. The practical advice generated by respondents has the potential to effect positive social change by improving the diversified mentoring experiences of minority faculty members in our discipline. In addition, by extending the research about diversified mentoring relationships into the area of intergroup relations, this study has bridged the gap between two previously unrelated areas of inquiry. By investing in positive diversified mentoring relationships, we can also improve the state of intergroup relations in our academic institutions. Finally, this study employed qualitative methods to explore a topic that has traditionally been examined from a quantitative perspective. By blending traditional qualitative and autoethnographic methods, this investigation has generated novel insights about the ways in which the quality of diversified mentoring relationships affect protégés’ co-cultural communication practices. Hopefully,

future research will extend this line of inquiry to explore the dialogic process by which mentors and protégés discursively construct intergroup relations in the context of diversified mentoring relationships.

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