

**Mentoring: A Brief Analysis of Functionalism, Critical Race Theory, and Feminist Based  
Approaches**

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## **Mentoring: A Brief Analysis of Functionalism, Critical Race Theory, and Feminist Based Approaches**

There is no question that mentoring college students has long-lasting benefits for the students (and often for the mentors too; however, this paper will focus exclusively on students' experiences). Even though the practice of mentoring can be traced back to Ancient Greece, the word itself did not appear in the English language until 1778 (Irby & Boswell, 2016).

Paradoxically, despite the practice of mentoring being so widespread, the literature has not reached a consensus in defining the term - as of 2009, there were more than 50 different definitions in the literature (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). For the purpose of this study, we will define mentoring as being a relationship between two persons, where the more experienced individual is dedicated to providing developmental support to the other, less experienced person (Kram, 1985). Furthermore, we note that previous literature reviews have identified four common characteristics of mentoring 1) when it comes to mentoring, the relationships between mentors and mentees focus on the growth and development of the mentee, and the relationship itself can take various forms (i.e., traditional mentoring, relational mentoring, critical race theory based mentoring, holistic mentoring), 2) mentoring experiences usually include support in professional and career related areas as well as emotional support, 3) mentoring relationships can be personal and reciprocal in nature, and 4) usually, the mentor is a person with more experience, influence, and achievement in the educational arena (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). In this paper, we will analyze the concept and practice of mentoring college students considering three different theoretical frameworks: functionalism, critical race theory, and feminism.

### **How do college students benefit from mentoring?**

In 2014, Gallup rolled out the result of one of the most extensive polls on student populations under a provocative yet intuitive title, "Life in College Matters for Life After College" (Ray & Marken, 2014). Based on a survey of nearly 30,000 college students, the study indicates that the type of college or program students attended did not matter most for their future workplace engagement and wellbeing - instead, what mattered was how they went to college, what type of experiences they accumulated while being in college, and the type of support and mentorship they received as students (Ray & Marken, 2014). In fact, 63% of respondents indicated that they had at least one professor in college who made them excited about learning, 27% of respondents indicated that their professors cared about them as a person, and 22% of students stated that they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams (Ray & Marken, 2014). The study further revealed that students' odds of being engaged at work are 2.2 higher if they had a mentor who supported and encouraged them in college, and their overall wellbeing was 4.6 higher if they were engaged at work and 1.7 higher if they had a mentor while in college (Ray & Marken, 2014). Research suggests that college students greatly benefit from mentoring: they show increased academic performance, higher attainment and graduation rates, and overall, better career and personal development opportunities (Crisp, Baker, Griffin, Lunsford & Pifer, 2017). Furthermore, mentoring increases students' civic outcomes while helping them develop and find their professional identity (Crisp et al., 2017).

### **Functionalism and Mentoring**

The functionalist view suggests that any given society is a system formed of

interconnected parts, each serving very well defined functions meant to contribute to the whole system (Mishra, 1977). This framework resulted in a concept named functionalist mentoring, which is focusing on efficiency and equilibrium and aims to improve students' performance (Brockbank, 2006). Functionalist mentoring is concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than encouraging individuals to engage in inquiry and questioning as means of learning and developing (Brockbank, 2006). Unfortunately, this approach tends to preserve norms and recycle power dynamics, often resulting in a cycle of organizational hierarchies (Brockbank, 2006). By its nature, functionalist mentoring is not diverse, and it usually pumps the same white, middle-class individuals in and out of the various circles of learning, thus facilitating the reproduction of social inequalities (Brockbank, 2006). While performing functionalist mentoring, mentors tend to act based on the perceived needs of their mentees - however, since the mentors themselves are usually white, middle-class individuals, it is unlikely that they can fully understand or relate to their mentees' lived experiences, especially when it comes to underrepresented populations (Brockbank, 2006; Crisp et al., 2017).

Traditional mentoring practices can fall under the functionalist mentoring umbrella especially if the mentoring is done solely with the purpose of serving the needs of the organization (i.e., mentoring college students for retention purposes, not for the students' benefit but so that the institution can gain a better reputation, and therefore, access to more resources) (Brockbank, 2006).

But functionalist mentoring is allegedly not all bad. According to Darwin (2000), functionalist mentoring is nothing but a "rational and hierarchical process," which proves to be "efficient, instrumental, and unproblematic," and overall a great fit, especially for workplace

mentoring programs. However, this mentoring model is unlikely to yield positive results when mentoring college students, as research indicates that a more holistic rather than authoritative approach is preferred in the faculty to student mentoring model (Crisp et al., 2017).

### **Critical Race Theory and Mentoring**

Since functionalist mentoring is an authoritative model, focused on maintaining power dynamics and placing minimal value on diversity, it begs the question: how does effective mentoring look like for unrepresented college students? According to Blackwell (1989), academia has a severe issue in terms of diversity: there are very few faculty members from various cultural and ethnical backgrounds. Not surprisingly, Blackwell (1989) suggests that mentoring could help close the gap, in the sense that by mentoring more students of color, the institutions could eventually produce more faculty of color, which can then, of course, help them mentor more students of color. Though this closed mentoring circle yielded some results, an astonishing gap still exists: as of 2017, from over 1.5 million faculty at postsecondary degree-granting institutions, only 3% of them were each Black males and females, and Hispanic males and females, and less than 1% were of American Indian/Alaska Native descent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that faculty to student mentoring significantly increases African American and Hispanic students' likelihood of graduating from college and attending graduate school, and even more so when both faculty and students are coming from underrepresented minority groups, in which both mentors and mentees share the same attributes in terms of race, gender, or both (Davis, 2010; Crisp et al., 2017).

According to Brown (2009) who approaches mentoring in relation to critical race theory, there are several points that we should keep in mind when thinking about mentoring of minority

students: 1) racism is all around us and the chances that we are perpetuating it, albeit unintentionally, are high, 2) we should seek to understand marginalized populations and meet them where they are not where we think they should be, 3) we should ask explicit questions and listen to students' narratives because there is no other way but active listening to truly learn about the mentees, their aspirations, goals, and plans for the future, and 4) we should check for our own interest convergence - in other words, we should examine how mentoring of minorities benefits us and the society as a whole.

The benefits of mentoring are undeniable for any student, and even more so for minority students. For example, a longitudinal study that followed Latinx students from the first semester of their freshman year in college and all the way to graduation, for 4.5 years, found that mentoring significantly increased students' academic persistence, GPA, and likelihood of graduating (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Kurpius & Rund, 2011). Similarly, mentoring helped underrepresented students better manage psychosocial aspects of their lives and played a critical role in decreasing their depression and stress levels (Phinney, Torres Campos, Kallemeyn & Kim, 2011). It is important to note that oftentimes mentoring programs geared towards underrepresented groups have a social justice orientation, which means that these students are not necessarily starting and living their college experiences at the same plain level with the vast student body, but instead, they are already behind in terms of their practical and relational knowledge and ability to navigate the world (Crisp et al., 2017).

From a critical race theory standpoint, mentoring tends to be more effective when conducted by faculty or peers that belong to the same group, be it race, gender, culture, or all, because they can relate better to the students, they have a broader understanding of cultural

factors that might impact students' outcomes while in college - simply put, because they have the required cultural capital knowledge to have a more efficient and open rapport with the students (Rios-Ellis, Rascon, Galvez, Inzunza-Franco, Bellamy & Torres, 2015). This is, in fact, consistent with underrepresented students' expectations of their faculty mentors as research indicates that minority students seek to connect with mentors who share the same cultural orientation as them because, at a psychological level, they perceive that to be signaling of a safer, richer, more relatable environment (Cox, Yang & Dicke-Bohmann, 2014).

For a long time, faculty to student mentoring has been done by employing an anti-blackness approach in which mentors, while having the best intentions at heart for their students (i.e., help them achieve social capital, dress "right," do research right, job hunt right, etc.), forgot to take into consideration and celebrate students' uniqueness such as their cultural background, their Blackness (Weiston-Serdan & Daneshzadeh, 2016). Instead, perhaps unintentionally, faculty encouraged students to assimilate into the mainstream, white culture, behave appropriately, wear their hair appropriately, and express themselves adequately (Weiston-Serdan & Daneshzadeh, 2016). Therefore, mentors must engage in intentional and reflective practices as related to critical race theory and mentoring, and be willing to meet their students where they really are at, to celebrate and guide them accordingly, without insinuating that a tradeoff between students' heritage and academic or professional success is desirable (Weiston-Serdan & Daneshzadeh, 2016).

### **A Feminist Approach to Mentoring**

As we have seen throughout this paper, traditional mentoring is deeply rooted in power hierarchies and sometimes plain patriarchy, where relationships are usually transactional in

nature, with one party being mature and experienced, the mentor, and the other party being a younger novice, looking to absorb whatever knowledge their mentor is willing to pass down. The feminist approach to mentoring comes to challenge these assumptions by openly addressing the fact that mentoring across a diverse population of students (i.e., age, gender, race) is no easy task and can carry significant complications (Benishek, Bieschke, Park & Slattery, 2004). In this model of mentoring, feminists are working on developing new parameters for fostering healthy mentor-mentee relationships, parameters meant to 1) account for power dynamics, to treat both parties as active learners and knowledge creators, and to 3) account for the boundaries between the professional and personal world (Benishek et al., 2004).

Feminist theory as applied to mentoring argues that mentors should also be sensitive to 1) gender dynamics - for example, it is well known that women tend to volunteer more than men for service positions as institutions might encourage and even require such service positions to be in place for institutional advancement and allegedly for the benefit of the person performing the said service (Benishek et al., 2004), and 2) one's whiteness or privilege which often comes at play when there is a power imbalance and when the mentor/mentee come from different social classes, with different cultural and social capital (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). Therefore, in such situations, misunderstandings and conflicts may easily arise and hinder the mentoring relationship (Benishek et al., 2004).

Feminists argue that mentoring is a complex relationship and process and it should be based on a holistic approach, where the mentor and mentee bring their whole selves to the table, acknowledge their privileges, and openly communicate and work to identify potential blind spots and barriers to a healthy, mutually beneficial mentoring relationship (Benishek et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the feminist framework asserts that mentoring should not be transactional in nature (more mature party teaches the disciple) but instead should focus on developing and fostering a relational model, where both parties bring valuable knowledge to the table (Benishek et al., 2004). In fact, Kalbfleish and Keyton (1995) introduced a relational model of mentoring which, they suggest, 1) is a better fit for helping a variety of mentees achieve their professional goals (including groups who would not thrive under traditional mentoring models, such as minorities and women), 2) must acknowledge the impact of the work/school environment on the mentoring relationship (i.e., a university that it is not very diverse might adversely contribute to the experiences of minority students, who would have in such a case very little role models or people to identify with), and 3) is strongly preferable for fostering deeper and more meaningful interpersonal relationships. To take it a step further, Fassinger (1997) proposed a relational mentoring model in which the mentor's primary job is to recognize and acknowledge the difference between them and mentees, and actively use their power to support and advance mentees' goals. Arguably, this might just be the best mentoring model out there because it removes the power dynamic issues and focuses instead on celebrating diversity and embracing it throughout the relational mentoring encounter (Fassinger, 1997). The model was updated by Benishek et al. (2004) to include explicit infusions of multiculturalism across the model so that 1) differences among people are clearly identified, 2) differences are explored when appropriate (i.e., when they might be relevant for the relationship, when any party might be willing to share and the other one comfortable to receive information), and 3) by engaging in the previous two points, the mentor and mentee will have created the baseline for a relational exchange that is mindful of differences (Benishek et al., 2004).

Feminist theorists have also expressed some degree of worry, as relational mentoring could deviate from the track and transform the mentor/mentee relationship into a potentially problematic one, where the mentoring - a form of prosocial behavior - gets misunderstood or misguided and results into ethical and/or behavioral mishaps (i.e., women mentors being perceived as weak or sexualized, undesired sexual attention, etc.) (Benishke et al., 2004). Furthermore, as with any other form of prosocial behavior, mentoring and especially relational mentoring, can lead to a mentor's psychological exhaustion and burnout, and so, it is important that the mentor constantly checks with themselves for any signs of feelings of overwhelming (Bolino & Grant, 2016). Some researchers go as far as cautioning that mentoring can be seen as a form of alloparenting - in evolutionary psychology, this term refers to a community member carrying for someone else's offspring, and suggests that with this, some forms of mentor to mentee aggression or microaggression can manifest (McClelland, 2009).

Even though the feminist relational model of mentoring is relatively young, being developed approximately 20-25 years ago, research suggests that it can be highly beneficial by helping mentees develop social capital, identify better professional opportunities, and even reduce depression and stress among students (Johnson, 2015; Phinney et al., 2011). Not only that relational mentoring is beneficial for mentees but since in this model the relationships are collaborative and mutually enhancing, mentors benefit from increased knowledge, professional development, and personal wellbeing (Remer, 2011).

In this paper, we briefly examined mentoring from a functionalist, critical race theory, and feminist perspective. With so many mentoring programs being launched nowadays, it is important that scholars and practitioners alike place more importance than ever on examining the

existing literature and gathering new data to shine light on the most effective and culturally sensitive ways to mentor students. We should be open to always thinking critically about mentoring and exploring new paths that would bring the most of any holistic relationships between a mentor and his or her mentees, for mutual growth and shared knowledge. After all, mentoring is based on the idea of bringing positive outcomes to students, in terms of equity, social justice, formal or informal knowledge while considering students' backgrounds, identity, and their overall experiences. To that end, perhaps the most critical mission that mentoring fulfills is a communication one: to let the students know that there are people (mentors) available to listen in an open and active, non-judgemental manner, and to help guide them towards their goals (Crisp et al., 2017).

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