Mentoring Relationships Through the Lens of Race and Gender

Mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers and point out unexpected delights along the way. (Daloz, 1987)

As Daloz's[1] description implies, mentoring holds a special place in the pantheon of developmental relationships used by employees in organizations. A mentor has been defined as a senior person emotionally invested in the development of a junior person. She offers both career guidance and socioemotional support to her protégé.[2] The benefits of mentoring, which have been widely touted in both the popular and scholarly literatures include: greater career satisfaction, promotions, compensation, self-esteem at work, and job involvement.[3] Individuals in mentoring relationships are clearly at an advantage when compared to those who do not have access to such relationships. Although these relationships are not without their challenges[4], when mentoring is enacted between colleagues in the manner described by Daloz, there is not a more potent and critical relationship available to guide a protégé's career development.

The Importance of Mentoring for Women: A Guide Through the Minefield

Mentoring relationships have been suggested as particularly crucial to the career development and advancement of women. A recent book from Sheila Wellington and Catalyst, a not-for-profit research organization focusing on issues of women's advancement in corporations, suggests that access to mentoring is "the single most important reason why men tend to rise higher than women."[5] In a recent survey of 1,251 executive women, four out of five

senior women executives indicated that a mentor had been significant to their success.[6]

Mentoring may be particularly important to women, because despite a number of advances, women are still hitting the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier to advancement based on gender biases.[7] These biases are readily evident when you consider the relative progress, or lack thereof, of women into the upper levels of business, government, academia, and the professions. Although women make up 50% of managerial and specialized professional positions in U.S. organizations, there is still a disconcerting dearth of women in top leadership roles.[8] Mentoring has been suggested as one effective tool to address this dearth.

Anecdotal accounts and empirical research suggest that mentoring is a powerful mechanism in aiding women in their journey to the executive suite.[9] Contrary to expectations, the research shows that women are as likely to have a mentor as men. Women are also as likely as men to act as mentors. Ragins's review of the mentoring literature suggests that male and female protégés also experience similar outcomes from mentoring relationships. In terms of career outcomes, career mobility, job satisfaction, and promotions resulting from mentoring are not moderated by gender.[10]

But there are critical gender differences in men's and women's *experiences* of mentoring. While access to mentoring for women and men may be comparable, women often have to work harder to establish relationships that cross lines of gender, hierarchy and, for women of color, race. Women are also more likely to be involved in a cross-gender relationship; most mentors are still men by virtue of their

position at the top of organizations. These male mentors may serve a different purpose for female protégés than they do for their male charges; they act in several roles that help women navigate the minefield they face in moving up the corporate hierarchy.[11] Mentors provide legitimacy to their female protégés, challenge gender-based stereotypes, offer reflected power, and share information that is generally only gained with admission to the "old boys' network." Each one of these functions is critical for women in a way that is not necessarily so for men. The mentors are in fact vouching for their female protégés; the message that their mentoring relationships send is, "My female protégé is okay. We can let her in." This explicit recognition of men's and women's differential experiences of mentoring suggests that the power dynamics and relationship building are more complicated in cross-gender mentoring relationships and that they may demand more from both the mentors and the protégés.

Not surprisingly, the picture becomes more complex when we look at mentoring relationships through the lens of *both* gender and race. When we look more closely at the research on gender and mentoring, a number of questions about which group of women is being given entrée arise. In fact, samples for much of the research on mentoring are predominantly white. Based on the research conducted in the past two decades, we know virtually nothing about the mentoring experiences of women of color.[12] Do women of color gain similar benefits to those reported by white women in their mentoring relationships? What benefits and challenges are raised by cultivating mentoring relationships at the crossroads of race and gender? Why don't we have more information about the expe-

riences of women of color; where are their voices in the mentoring literature?

Where are the Voices of Women of Color?

In fact, the voices of women of color have been absent from the mentoring literature for several reasons. In 1990, Cox and Nkomo[13] wrote about the relative absence of published research on race and ethnicity. They posited that for a number of reasons, research on race is not published to the same extent as other important organizational topics. While the 1990s have seen a promising increase in the number of articles published that focus on race and ethnicity, scholars doing research in this arena still face questions about the legitimacy and validity of their work.

Second, there is an assumption that the experiences of all women are explained by looking at white women.[14] This tendency has been labeled the "prefix error"—that which does not carry a prefix is assumed to be universal. Thus although mentoring has been clearly linked to the advancement of women in general (white women inferred), its role in the career development of women of color has not been clearly defined. This pattern of assumptions is not new. The early empirical research on mentoring was done using predominantly male samples. In the early 1980s, there was a realization that the mentoring experiences of men may not fully explain the experiences of women. Just as the research that focused solely on men and their mentoring relationships was insufficient to fully illustrate women's mentoring experiences, it is also not enough to study white women and suggest that their experiences are universally descriptive of women of color.

A third reason for the lack of information on the mentoring experiences of women of color is the challenge of recruiting sufficient numbers of study participants to participate in research efforts. Of 2.9 million women holding managerial and administrative jobs in the private sector (the population traditionally studied in the management literature), only 14 percent are women of color.[15] Standard methods of sampling have not yielded data sets that include women of color in sufficient numbers to speak to their experience. Each of these three reasons bears some culpabil-

ity for the dearth of research on women of color's mentoring experiences. It is only through consciously and proactively working to overcome the barriers that I've discussed that we will give voice to women of color and their mentoring experiences.

Mentoring Experiences of Women of Color: What We Know

As noted above, there have been few empirical efforts to examine the mentoring experiences of women of color in the management literature. In the past five years, there has been an emergence of research exploring the career experiences of women across the continuum of ethnicity. Catalyst conducted a three-year, multi-phase study of women of color in corporate management, surveying 1,735 women of color from 30 companies.[1] Bell and Nkomo's comparative study focuses on the life and career experiences of successful black and white women in the corporate sector, based on life history interviews of 120 women and an in-depth survey of 825 women.[2] Based on findings from both Catalyst and Bell and Nkomo, a picture of the mentoring experiences of women of color is beginning to emerge.

A number of commonalities regarding career advancement emanated from the two studies. Results from both studies indicate that in comparison to white women, women of color are underrepresented in senior management positions and are promoted more slowly. Women of color were also less satisfied with their career progress than white women. These results are parallel to findings from my research. In a study of the mentoring experiences of 195 professional black and white women, I found that black women reported lower levels of satisfaction with their careers than white women.[18] Women of color agree that a critical resource for their successful career advancement is having an influential mentor or sponsor. Research from Catalyst found that 44% of women of color rated access to a mentor among the top four success criteria in comparison to 37% of white women.[19] Yet, one of the most striking findings from the Catalyst study is that 47% of women of color reported that lack of access to a mentor was a barrier to their advancement, in contrast to 29% of white women. This particular comparison suggests that lack of access to a

mentor is more salient to women of color than it is to their white counterparts.

While there are a number of similarities across the mentoring experiences of women of color, there are also some differences; the mentoring experiences of women of color are not monolithic. The Catalyst study presents a number of interesting contrasts among the three groups of women of color respondents. For example, Asian-American women were significantly less likely than either African-American or Hispanic women to report that they received advice on career strategies from their mentors. African-American women were more likely to report a relationship characterized by mutual respect and trust with mentors of color.

Results from studies on the experiences of women of color have yielded other differences, highlighting tensions and raising new questions. For example, how do the experiences of women of color vary along the dimension of organizational rank? Results from the Catalyst study indicate that mentoring was more prevalent for senior-level women of color than women at lower levels. Generational differences may be yet another dimension that yields important distinctions among women of color. Bell and Nkomo noted that few of the African-American women managers in their study had mentors. Their study participants were pioneers, members of the first significant wave of women to enter managerial positions in the workplace. Do the mentoring experiences of those trailblazers represent those of more recent arrivals to the corporate arena? In my study of black and white alumnae from several top-tier MBA programs, black women reported as much access to mentoring as their white counterparts.[20] But there are significant differences in the black women in my study and those in the Bell and Nkomo study. The women in my study were younger and had less work experience. How are these contrary results explained? Are they the result of changing organizational dynamics or can they be attributed to something unique about the samples that were used? These findings reveal fruitful areas for further inquiry; more research on the effects of variation in organizational rank and generational differences among women of color is needed.

The areas of convergence and divergence found in the small but growing body of research at the intersection of race and gender suggests that there are a number of areas where further exploration and deeper analysis can lead to an enhanced understanding of the collective and unique mentoring experiences of women of color.

The Promise of Praxis: Suggestions to Researchers and Practitioners

The research and ideas presented here suggest that there is work to be done on two fronts, both research and practice. I offer suggestions to researchers seeking to explore and understand the effects of the interaction of race and gender on mentoring relationships. I also have suggestions for practitioners, who are on the front line working with white women and women of color and strategizing about how to use this information to affect change in organizations.

Researchers should consider:

Being open to using different methodologies. The intersection of race and gender is a relatively new area of inquiry in the management literature. Kram (1988) discusses the need to utilize a flexible data collection method when studying a novel topic.[21] As such, researchers should be open to using a variety of methodological approaches, including in-depth qualitative interviews as well as large-scale quantitative surveys. Of course, these decisions about methodology are accompanied by tradeoffs; large-scale quantitative studies offer some measure of generalizability while in-depth qualitative studies may provide rich descriptive accounts. We will need inquiry from both perspectives to build our knowledge on the effects of race and gender on mentoring relationships.

Being purposeful about obtaining diverse samples. With careful consideration and proactive strategizing, researchers can find ways to reach out to diverse populations such that the resulting samples are inclusive. These efforts will not necessarily be convenient or cost effective; researchers may have to partner with associations or other groups dedicated to serving the diverse constituents that they would like to include in their research efforts. Once researchers get diverse samples, every effort should be made not to lump together groups across ethnicities. The experiences of each group are rooted in their own particular socio-historical journey to the 21st century; this unique perspective affects their lives in organizations today and should be taken into consideration.

Exploring other literatures and theoretical frameworks. Because the women in management literature has focused primarily on white women's experiences, researchers will need to reach across to alternative literatures and theoretical frameworks. Holvino suggests that there is value to looking at other theoretical frameworks as they "influence the questions we ask, the questions that remain hidden and the outcomes and methods sought."[22] She explores the possible contribution of four feminist frameworks to the development of organizational interventions that address the intersection of race and gender. Another example can be found in the work of Helen Muller.[23] In her exploration of American Indian women managers, Muller draws on the literature of anthropologists and American Indian women. In my own research, I draw on the writing of black feminists and from theoretical frameworks grounded in the fields of psychology and sociology.[24] Only by reaching across disciplines and frameworks will we gain access to theories and empirical support to build a foundation from which we can explicate women of color's mentoring experiences.

Practitioners should consider:

Providing support to women of color employees. Results from the recent research on women of color in corporate management suggest that their managers may play a particularly crucial role in their development and advancement. Because women of color have less access to mentors, managers should be equipped to both mentor and manage their women of color employees. Survey data indicates that the majority of mentors of women of color will be white men. Thus, women of color face a greater probability of having to develop mentoring relationships that cross both gender and race lines. All of the research on cross-race and cross-gender mentoring suggests that these relationships are challenging to develop and maintain. Catalyst suggests that managers should be trained, evaluated, and rewarded on their ability to support and advance their direct-reports, including women of color.

Being judicious users of formal mentoring programs. Formal mentoring programs are a popular organizational intervention; recent statistics suggest that one-third of the nation's major corporations are implementing formal mentoring programs.[25] Many companies are using formal mentoring programs as a way to reach out to those who may have less access to mentoring relationships. But, an emerging body of research on formal versus informal mentoring indicates that these initiatives should be developed with some caution. In my review of the formal mentoring research, I note several internal and external challenges women should consider as they participate in formal mentoring programs.[26] Results from research on formal mentoring suggest that participants in formal initiatives do not gain the same benefits as protégés engaged in informal mentoring relationships. Ragins and Cotton warn that organizations may not be aiding their female employees if women turn towards ineffective, formal mentors rather than developing relationships with informal mentors.[27]

Examining organizational practices and systems. Is the organization mentoring-friendly? There are a number of questions that organizational leaders should ask to assess the readiness of their environment to support a culture of mentoring. Are there opportunities for communication and interaction across organizational levels? Is the development of employees a valued function? Do the reward and evaluation systems reflect the importance of mentoring and developmental support for all employees? Supportive and effective interpersonal interactions do not develop in a vacuum; women of color have a greater chance of developing mentoring relationships in an environment that is supportive of mentoring.

Conclusion

Mentoring relationships provide a critical source of support for the professional development of women. Until very recently, a common and unspoken assumption was held that if we learned about the mentoring experiences and outcomes for white women, we would be able to speak to the experiences of all women. But the

nascent body of research by scholars examining the mentoring experiences of women of color clearly debunks this assumption. We need to be far more proactive and thoughtful about how mentoring relationships may be differentially accessed based on the intersection of race and gender. We must contemplate how our research paradigms and frameworks should be adjusted to accommodate hypotheses and samples that are inclusive of the mentoring experiences of women along the spectrum of ethnic diversity. The challenges of mentoring, particularly across lines of race and gender, are not insignificant. But the promise of mentoring, that women of all ethnicities are supported in reaching their fullest potential, is a goal for which it is worthy to strive.

Prepared by Stacy Blake-Beard, Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Gender in Organizations, SIMMONS Graduate School of Management and Assistant Professor of Administration, Planning and Social Policy at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

Endnotes

1. Daloz, L. A. (1987). *Effective Teaching and Mentoring: Realizing the Transformational Power of Adult Learning Experiences.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

2. Crosby, F. J. (1999). The developmental literature on developmental relationships. In A.J. Murrell, F.J. Crosby & R.J. Ely (Eds.), *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships Within Multicultural Organizations.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

3. Ragins, B.R. (1999). Gender and mentoring relationships: A review and research agenda for the next decade. In G.N. Powell (Ed.), *Handbook of Gender & Work.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

4. O'Neill, R. M. & Sankowsky, D. (forthcoming). The Caligula phenomenon: Mentoring relationships and theoretical abuse. *Journal of Management Inquiry.*

5. Wellington, S. & Catalyst. (2001). *Be Your Own Mentor: Strategies from Top Women on the Secrets of Success.* New York: Random House.

6. Catalyst. (1996). *Women in Corporate Leadership: Progress and Prospects.* New York: Catalyst.

7. Morrison, A., White, R., Velsor, E., and the Center for Creative Leadership. (1994). *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

8. Merrill-Sands, D. & Kolb, D.M. (2001). *Women as leaders: The Paradox of success. CGO Insights, No. 9.* Boston, MA: CGO, Simmons Graduate School of Management.

9. O, Neill, R.M., Horton, S. & Crosby, F. J. (1999). Gender issues in developmental relationships. In A.J. Murrell, F.J. Crosby & R.J. Ely (Eds.), *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships Within Multicultural Organizations.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

10. Ragins, B.R. (1999).

11. Ragins, B.R. (1999).

12. Blake-Beard, S.D. (1999). The costs of living as an outsider within: An analysis of the mentoring relationships and career success of black and white women in the corporate sector. *Journal of Career Development,* 26(1), 21-36.

13. Cox, T. & Nkomo, S.M. (1990). Invisible men and women: A status report on race as a variable in organizational behavior research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior,* 11, 419-431.

14. Bell, E.L., Denton, T.C. & Nkomo, S. (1993). Women of color in management: Toward an inclusive analysis. In E. Fagenson (Ed.), *Women in Management: Vol. 4. Trends, Issues, and Challenges in Managerial Diversity* (pp. 105-130). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

15. Wellington, S. & Catalyst.

16. Catalyst. (1999). *Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Barriers* (p. 5). New York, NY: Catalyst.

17. Bell, E. & Nkomo, S. (2001). *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

18. Blake-Beard, S.D. (1999).

19. These statistics are from a comparison of data from the Catalyst (1999) study of women of color in the corporate sector with data from a Catalyst (1996) study of comparable white women.

20. Blake-Beard, S.D. (1999).

21. Kram, K.E. (1985). *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life.* Glenville, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.

22. Holvino, E. (2001). *Complicating gender: The simultaneity of race, gender and class in organization change(ing). CGO Working Paper No. 14.* Boston, MA: CGO, Simmons Graduate School of Management.

23. Muller, H.J. (1998). American Indian women managers: Living in two worlds. *Journal of Management Inquiry,* 7(1), 4-28.

24. Blake, S. (1999). At the crossroads of race and gender: Lessons from the mentoring experiences of professional black women. In A.J. Murrell, F.J. Crosby & R.J. Ely (Eds.), *Mentoring Dilemmas: Developmental Relationships Within Multicultural Organizations.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

25. Ragins, B.R. & Cotton, J.L. (1999). Mentor functions and outcomes: A comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology,* 84(4), 529-550.

26. Blake-Beard, S.D. (2001). Taking a hard look at formal mentoring programs: A consideration of potential challenges facing women. *Journal of Management Development,* 20(4), 331-345.

27. Ragins & Cotton (1999).