



Two Cultures Collide: Bridging the Generation Gap in a Non-traditional Mentorship

Lisa R. Merriweather

University of North Carolina- Charlotte, North Carolina USA

Alberta J. Morgan

Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana USA

Cross-cultural mentoring relationships between younger mentors and older mentees are increasing in frequency across all levels of post-secondary education. Generational cultural differences can result in conflict and misunderstanding and therefore should be considered in non-traditional inter-generational mentoring relationships. Through auto-ethnographic inquiry, we, a younger faculty member and older graduate student, explored our mentoring relationship. We identified communication, respect, and ambiguous roles as issues that significantly impacted our mentorship. The manifestation of power was also highlighted in the study. Keywords: Autoethnography, Intergenerational Cross-Cultural Mentoring, Graduate Students, Power Relationships

Mentoring has been an accepted method of developing students for many centuries (Cohen, 1995). The word “mentor” can be traced to the *Odyssey* and derives from Odysseus’ implicit trust in Mentor, to whom he delegated complete responsibility for raising his son Telemachus” (p. 1). Mentor performed all of the roles generally undertaken by the mentor in a traditional mentorship including coach, teacher, guardian, protector, and parent. Telemachus and Mentor had a deep personal relationship in which Mentor helped develop Telemachus’ career (Johnson & Ridley, 2004). Mentoring is frequently used in workplace and academic settings to develop potential in employees and learners.

In most instances research on mentorships involved a traditional inter-generational mentorship (older mentor and younger mentee). However post-secondary institutions have experienced a rise in non-traditional student enrollment (NCES, n.d.) who are older and typically have a gap between their educational experiences. These learners present a different set of needs, motivations and goals that must be addressed within the mentoring relationship. At the same time, due to retirements among the older generation of professors and the appointment of younger professors to replace them, these institutions are experiencing a decrease in the median age of their instructional workforce. These younger mentors are faced with the unique challenge of developing praxis for mentoring their older students. The intersection of where the older generation of students meets the younger generation of professors in a mentoring relationship (a non-traditional intergenerational mentorship) is rarely explored in the literature but poses an issue of growing practical significance to the higher education community. Our purpose in conducting this study was to describe and better understand this intersection and explore how age as a cross-cultural trait impacted the development of our academic mentorship in a graduate school setting.

Literature Review

The extant literature on mentoring is wide and varied. Some researchers discuss the goals of mentoring, such as career advancement, psychosocial development, and maintaining

and enhancing the mentee's quality of life (Anderson, 2005; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). Others have focused on types of mentoring such as peer mentoring which occurs when two persons of equal status mentor each other, and telementoring, which occurs via distance through the use of technological advances such as conference calling, email, or Skype (Guy, 2002; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Rankie, Fu & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Packard, 2003). Still others have emphasized the importance of mentoring marginalized groups such as women (Duff, 1999; Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Wunch, 1994), and underrepresented racial minorities (Moody, 2004; Paterson & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 1994). Literature on mentoring also exists within the contexts of higher education and the workplace (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Ishyama, 2007; Nora & Crisp, 2007).

The components of a successful mentorship seem to be the same, or at least similar, across a variety of populations and settings. For instance, in higher education, Ishiyama (2007) found that a successful mentorship for students in higher education included career support, academic/research support and a personal relationship which included listening to concerns (emotional support) and problem solving. These findings were supported by a series of studies with different populations (Crisp, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2007) and in studies of mentoring in the workplace (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Hamilton, Hamilton, & Rhodes, 2002)

Within higher education, studies find that mentorships are contributors to the success of women students. Gardiner, Tiggeman, Kerans, and Marshall (2007) found that women who were mentored were more likely to complete their programs, receive more grant money and promotions, and have better self-concepts as academics than women who were not mentored. Bruce's (1995) study of female doctoral students reported that mentorships offered crucial support in the areas of role modeling, professional development, and encouragement.

To a lesser extent, literature on cross-cultural mentoring with persons from marginalized groups exists. It is this body of literature that provides the conceptual foundation and grounding for this study. Cross-cultural mentoring occurs when people from different cultural groups participate in a mentoring relationship. A cultural group is defined broadly by "language, religious beliefs, customs and rules of etiquette, and the values and ideas people use to organize their lives and interpret their existence" (Healey, 2006) as well as other markers of identity such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. We contend that generational differences result in age also being a cultural variable. Cross-cultural mentorships represent what Moore (2000) articulates as "what modern-day mentoring actually looks like" (p. 152). Analysis of this literature provided a pivotal starting place for our exploration. In our review of the literature, we highlight three attributes of cross-cultural mentoring: cultural competence, trust, and power.

Cultural Competence

Engendering cultural competence is a key finding from the cross-cultural mentorship literature. Crutcher (2007) highlights the necessity of "navigating cultural boundaries: personal, gender, racial, ethnic, and geographic" (p. 45) when mentoring persons from different cultures. To become culturally competent, mentors must acknowledge the cultural bias found in current models of mentoring and appreciate the importance of resisting the inclination to interpret situations from his or her cultural center(s). It also entails understanding and respecting the value system, worldview and experiences of the mentee. As Guy (2002) argues, "the needs of African Americans and other racial minorities differ from those of whites in mentoring relationships because they frequently face issues of negative stereotypes, peer resentment, and skepticism about competence" (p. 33). Crutcher (2007) makes a similar point about gender. Developing strategies to understand and meet the

differentiated needs of the mentee whose socio-cultural reality differs from the mentors is paramount for a successful mentoring relationship.

Barker (2007) engages the notion of “perceived cultural distance” (p. 95) and mismanagement of “cultural perceptions” (p. 92), which includes a lack of knowledge of the other’s cultural heritage, and the impact of the other’s positionality on his or her lived reality. Hence, making deliberate efforts to genuinely know the mentee beyond surface demographics is important in a cross-cultural mentorship (Brinson & Kottler, 1993). As Barker (2007) states, “Cross-cultural competency included the participants’ becoming more aware of their own cultures, learning about the ‘others’ culture, and using cultural knowledge to better communicate and understand each other” (p. 96).

This acknowledgment of culture should not be approached stereotypically. That is, mentors should not engage in the act of essentializing as this is also a form of cross-cultural incompetence. Rather, there must be a willingness to learn about the culture(s) of the mentee. For instance, Crutcher (2007) postulates that men and women approach problem solving differently and this could result in misunderstandings between the mentee and mentor in cross-gender mentorships. Particularizing cultural knowledge is therefore a component of effective cross-cultural mentoring. Engaging cultural knowledge acquisition in this way reduces misunderstandings that are more likely a result of insensitivity and ignorance than outright malevolence (Brinson & Kottler, 1993).

Trust

Trust is not a factor unique to cross-cultural mentorships. It is paramount in many kinds of relationships but its importance is exponentially increased when the relationship has power divisions based on markers of social identity like gender and race. Lack of attention to the issue of trust can adversely affect the quality of the relationship. Walker’s (2006) work invites one to consider trust as being imbibed through “attaining a sense of mutuality” (p. 63) or “reciprocal understanding” (p. 68). This sense of mutuality reduces the perceived cultural distance between the mentor and the mentee.

Developing this sense of mutuality or trust can be challenging. Because of socially inscribed histories particularly with regard to race, cross-racial mentorships have to work harder to overcome issues based on lack of trust. Brinson and Kottler (1993) discuss the distrust that is bred within African Americans who are often perceived as Affirmative Action placements. This assumption implicitly questions their right to be there, their competence, and their intelligence. Many have been reared to believe that they must work twice as hard to get half as far and do this with the understanding that they will still be undervalued or purposely thwarted in their pursuits. Being raised in an atmosphere of hegemonic resistance to their advancement can result in feelings of being guarded and suspicious (Brinson and Kottler, 1993). For these reasons same race identification is often seen as conducive to effective mentorships. Trust may initially be elusive in cross-racial mentorships but can be attained through meaningful efforts to know the other and not be dismissive of the importance of the differential experiences.

Power

Power insidiously infiltrates all aspects of the mentorship. Becoming culturally competent and developing trust in a cross-cultural mentorship requires an understanding of power. Power often carries a negative perception in cross-cultural mentoring situations. Crutcher (2007) recognizes the nature of power within mentoring relationships, saying “mentoring relationships are not identical to peer relationships, which are usually predicated

on a horizontal or egalitarian reciprocity” (p. 47). The assumed superiority of the mentor’s knowledge and experience and the positional authority typically possessed by the mentor among other things, results in hierarchy (Hansman, 2002).

This influence of power becomes more complex when social ideas of dominant group privilege such as White privilege or male privilege is present. When the mentee, but more so the mentor, fails to engage cross-cultural competence and instead relies on stereotypical assumptions about the other, the influence of power can have an adverse impact on the relationship. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2002) wrote, the “power relationship is further magnified in cross-cultural mentoring, where the people are in differing locations in societal hierarchies of race and gender” (p. 22). They further state, “Therefore a cross-cultural mentoring relationship can be negatively affected by unrecognized patterns of stereotypical behavior that is encoded in the American psyche” (p. 18). Both parties need to understand the nature of privilege and power and how they can manifest themselves in negative ways within the mentorship. This is especially important when we consider the mentor’s pivotal role in helping the mentee to acquire knowledge and skills, and access beneficial opportunities.

There have been studies that have considered age as a cultural variable in the mentoring relationship. It has been recognized as a factor that impacts how reality is organized and interpreted and as a basis for commonality within generational groupings. Recent studies have considered the challenges and opportunities present when older mentors in the workplace or academia mentor the millennial generation (Cary, 2008; Shaunessy, 2009). For example, Walker (2009) highlights the unique skills and work ethic of the millennials while Krader (2010) emphasizes the need for different communication and teaching strategies. Both stress that generational differences are at the root of working differently with this generational cohort. Age can also function as other cultural variables do and can result in a form of cross-cultural mentoring. The cross-cultural mentoring and millennial literature offers insightful lessons for facilitating a mentorship, however not much research exists on the younger mentor-older mentee dyad.

As was alluded to previously, in many studies the mentor was defined as “older” and the mentee as “younger” even though as Guy (2002) highlights, “More recent formulations regard age as increasingly irrelevant whereas knowledge, skill, expertise, and experience become more essential” (p. 28). That is, we have entered an age in which the mentor can be younger. We, like a few before us (Daloz, 1999), believe that age should also be subjected to similar interrogations as other cross-cultural dynamics. However, in spite of the burgeoning possibilities of non-traditional intergenerational mentoring relationships occurring in higher education, particularly graduate schools, few have studied this phenomenon.

Daloz (1999) was one of the few to address age as an impact on non-traditional intergenerational mentoring relationships. While mentoring an older female student, he discovered the generation gap between older adult students and younger mentors unearths a different set of issues. Daloz misunderstood his mentee’s goals and purpose in returning to college. His tale of mentoring illustrated that traditional approaches for a traditional mentorship were not as effective with students who were senior to their mentors. These traditional approaches led to frustration and tension. His work reminds us of the cultural interplay that occurs between different generations of people.

In that vein, we report the results of an autoethnographic study. The primary research question we posed was what factors impact a mentorship when the mentor is significantly younger than the mentee? We investigated the unspoken and taken for granted contours of mentoring in this context. In doing so we identified areas that held potential for helping mentor and mentee dyads such as ours better understand their mentoring relationship. As such the study has practical and theoretical significance. It provides an example of the import of reflexivity in mentoring as well as enriching the extant literature on cross-cultural mentoring.

Method

We were interested in uncovering both those aspects of cross-cultural mentoring that were inherently the same but mainly those that were different in what we termed “upside-down” intergenerational mentorships. As a new graduate student and a junior faculty member we had a great deal to learn about our respective positions and ourselves. While many methods were at our disposal, we chose autoethnography because it proffered, as Young (2009) writes, “one crucial approach to understanding ourselves . . . by analyzing how we talk about ourselves in relation to each other” (p. 143). It allowed us to systematically learn more about our relationship.

Autoethnographic narratives help researchers to not only understand themselves better but also serve as vehicles to understanding others. As Chang (2008) observes, “self discovery in a cultural sense is intimately related to understanding others” (p. 34). The self-discovery coupled with “cultural analysis and interpretation” (p. 43) are what situates our research within the genre of autoethnography. Further, it is our attempt to understand as Ellis and Bochner (2000) write, “the larger social, political, historical, and cultural structures” (p. 145) that move our personal narratives into the realm of autoethnographic research.

Participants

We, the researchers, served as the participants in this study. I (*Miss Berta*) was a 58 year old White graduate student pursuing a Masters degree twenty years after completing a four-year degree. I had recently returned to Indiana from California to help care for my aging parents. Dr. Lisa was my first instructor in a program where I was trying to find my way through the complexities of academia. I (*Dr. Lisa*) was a 38 year old African American junior faculty member. This position was my first appointment in the professoriate. I had been at the university for three years when we embarked on this research study.

We worked with each other in various capacities: instructor-student, independent study advisor-advisee, and graduate student assistant supervisor-graduate student assistant. Mentoring occurred throughout these experiences and included, among others, course advisement, support through the various phases of the academic experience, and guidance on research development. Conversations included the sharing of tacit knowledge as well as explicit knowledge relevant to graduate school and applying to doctoral programs. The mentorship involved introduction to the professional academic community through personal introductions to scholars in the field and instruction on proposal development and conference presentation. Our relationship was intentional in this regard and was recognizable by both of us as a mentorship.

Process

We quickly realized that the typical mental schemas we held were ineffective as proper guides in our mentoring relationship and recognized our relationship as an opportunity to gain deeper knowledge of intergenerational mentoring. To begin the process of systematically better understanding ourselves, individually, and *vis a vis* the other, we submitted and received approval from the University’s Institutional Review Board.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) provided a framework for developing a process for using our “life experience to generalize to a larger group” (p. 738),” and to “introduce [our] personal ethnography into the practical contexts of everyday life, to people whose work would be enhanced by it” (p. 760). We hoped that the wider population of upside-down mentoring relationships would be able to reflect on the experiences that we shared to better understand

their own experiences and develop a more satisfying mentorship. We attempted to “document the moment-to moment, concrete details of a life” (p. 738) through answering independently a series of questions about ourselves and each other. We responded to the following questions:

- Describe your mentor, and how you chose your mentor.
- Describe how you mentor students, and how was the approach- consciously changed in the mentorship?
- “Tell me about a time you felt most satisfied in the relationship, and a time difficulty was experienced”.
- In what ways did the age difference hinder or enhance the mentoring relationship?

After answering these questions, we met multiple times to discuss our answers which inevitably led to re-evaluating, refining, and reconstructing our responses. During each session we took copious notes to document the conversation and then separately journaled about our experiences. In later meetings we shared our revised responses which allowed for continuous reflexivity in the data collection process.

As Ellis and Bochner (2000) indicate, “self-questioning...is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering. . . . [It] generates a lot of fears and doubts---and emotional pain. . . . [T]here’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself” (p. 738). This explains the non-procedural aspects of our process. With each conversation, we interrogated ourselves and the mentorship. Our process prompted another series of questions that impacted the collection and interpretation of the data:

- How might our storied lives be received by our peers and the wider research community?
- Will the research community misunderstand the intent behind our work or the self-revealing particulars that we included?
- How much is too much and when is enough not enough when revealing our stories?

Bearing this in mind, with intentionality we considered how we might “story” our I’s (Ellis, 2009, p. 14). Ellis (2009) wrote, “Stories are what we have, the barometers by which we fashion our identities, organize and live our lives, connect and compare our lives to others, and make decisions about how to live” (p. 16). To represent the intimacy of our connection to the meaning making process, the methods section is written in first person.

We chose a narrative analysis approach and attempted to “transform bits of autobiographical data into a culturally meaningful and sensible text” (Chang, 2008, p. 126). The analysis process involved a search for the interrelationships between our memories of the experience. We read and re-read our narrative responses and looked for commonalities and divergences between how we conceptualized the mentorship. In doing so we developed categories that seemed to capture the individual and shared plots that made up our story. As we uncovered areas of concern within the mentoring relationship, we explored the source of the issue and searched the data for similar experiences. This process took place during our individual times of reflection as well as during joint meetings. That is, our individual reflection through journaling informed our meetings and the analysis through dialogic conversation which, in turn, informed our thinking while reflecting alone. We then sought a larger framework for understanding how the various plots connected together and what those plots meant as we worked toward making further sense of our experience. This larger framework served as our theme. Our analysis was therefore a process that looked wholistically at our data— responses to the initial questions, the on-going dialogue in which

we interrogated our responses, and the journaling we engaged in as part of a reflexive process—followed by a search for categories and themes that incorporated parts of our data back into an intelligible whole.

Findings: Telling the Tales – Sharing our Stories

Our analysis revealed three categories of behaviors that exerted substantial influence on our mentoring relationship: communication, respect, and ambiguous roles.

Communication

We each had internal monologues that informed our behavior, resulting in troubled communication within the working relationship. As a new professor, I (Dr. Lisa) was pleased to know that the university supported and encouraged the use of technology both in and out of the classroom. I attended workshops to better master technological tools. Primary among these was Blackboard—the learning management system adopted by the university—and email. For me, using these tools was second nature. I was not so naïve as to think that everyone was as comfortable with the technology. In classes I alerted every student that Blackboard would be the primary means of communication for course-related tasks and interpersonal communication through e-mail was the best way to reach me. I was available for questions and thought I had designed a clear and tension free system for communicating with students. For most, but not all, the simple explanations and occasional demonstration of how to use the technology were sufficient. In spite of the availability of help, Miss Berta struggled silently in confusion and dismay. She acknowledged that “Dr. Lisa is more familiar with technology and is willing to help me through the maze of researching with technology” but as is common with some in her generation, she had less experience with new technology and was not as comfortable with the frequency or level of use required in her master’s program.

I (Miss Berta) was what one might call “technology delayed.” I was not confident in my use of technology and preferred to use even the most low-level technology such as email sparingly. Though incredibly bright and a talented writer, I saw myself as an imposter (Brookfield, 2006) who was inadequate and not smart enough when it came to technology. The digital divide between me, my much younger student colleagues, and my professor was as wide as the span between our ages. I felt this disadvantaged me in the academic setting... Though I adhered to the expectations for using technology, I still preferred to communicate in person, by phone, and, if needed, with writing, using pen, and paper. It was clear we had different communication preferences. This disparity in technology skills and medium preference initiated some discomfort for each of us.

This discomfort was also fueled by how we communicated. After the first semester of working together as professor and student (I had Dr. Lisa for the first 9 hours of my Master’s program. She directed an independent study for me and I also worked as Dr. Lisa’s graduate assistant), the amount of communication between us increased substantially as did the potential for strain.

Miss Berta was adapting to the digital age and understood the necessity of using email to communicate needed information to me. I lived more than 120 miles away and had limited time on campus. Miss Berta was very thorough and often reported back through email in great detail her progress on projects and graduate assistant tasks. I would receive them and respond via email with “Okay,” “Looks good,” “Appreciate it,” or other short phrases. Though I consistently responded quickly, the communication left Miss Berta wondering was it really okay or did the lack of elaboration convey a sense of dissatisfaction. I, on the other hand, knowing that more in-depth discussion would occur in one of our regularly scheduled

meetings, felt I adequately acknowledged both the receipt of the work and satisfaction with what had been received through each brief email.

The self doubt that plagued me (Miss Berta) in terms of my technology skills found expression in my interpretation of one and two word phrases. Reflecting on this I said, “Dr. Lisa gave quick, short instructions which often left me feeling inadequate and lost in the process. At first, I did not want to look like I could not handle the project and did not ask for help.” In some ways this self-doubt almost stopped me from asking Dr. Lisa to supervise my independent study. It was difficult for me to make the initial contact because I was not sure she would be interested in working with me because I am so old. Age, in my eyes, was perceived as an undesirable quality and the root of my perceived difficulties in higher education. However, for me (Dr. Lisa), age did not factor in the same way. My communication style was much more a reflection of my personality. I wrote, “By nature, I am very soft spoken and typically listen more than I speak. When I do speak, I tend to be direct and to the point.” This was an apt characterization of my communication through email as well—short and sweet. For me, long and detailed were the signs of displeasure. For Miss Berta, “short and sweet” was a foreign language that required translation. These instances reminded us, that in the absence of healthy dialogue, small, easily resolvable problems could become large, misinterpreted problems in a mentorship.

Respect

Mutual respect for each other and the place in life that we each were situated helped us to communicate more openly. But this level of understanding was not initially present in the mentoring relationship. Learning what it meant to be respectful of the other was imperative for the success of the mentorship. This in part involved learning how to talk to each other and how to best interpret the behavior of the other.

An example can be seen in our attempts to accommodate each other’s needs. I (Miss Berta) preferred to meet in person to inform Dr. Lisa of my progress. I would request a meeting, and typically desired to meet with Dr. Lisa as soon as she arrived on campus. Thus I would set the appointment time based on Dr. Lisa’s anticipated arrival. I (Dr. Lisa) preferred meetings to be set significantly after my anticipated arrival time due to the distance I traveled and the responsibilities at home that needed to be handled prior to my leaving. Miss Berta reflected,

This situation [commuting] often made Dr. Lisa arrive late to scheduled meetings where she would find me waiting for her. Since I am in the habit of arriving a few minutes early, I am used to waiting—I actually use the wait to gather my thoughts and prepare for the meeting. In addition, I enjoy the few minutes of quiet before a meeting or event. At times, [though] I felt disrespected while Dr. Lisa felt guilty every time she found me waiting for her. I couldn’t figure out how to address our feelings.

Miss Berta was a habitual early arriver. Between her arriving 5 to 10 minutes early and my arriving 5 to 10 minutes late, she was waiting 10 to 20 minutes for a meeting. Miss Berta, from her experiences with motherhood, understood the challenges that I faced and was not unduly agitated by the situation. Interestingly, I was agitated and experienced this situation in ways that brought age to the forefront of the discussion. One memory in particular highlights this:

I don't know if the difficulty was experienced on Miss Berta's end but I seem to always run late. I am often driving a distance to arrive on campus and inevitably I am late for our scheduled appointment. It is awkward to walk in and see that she is there waiting for me. I am always expecting to be chastised as this is the role of the elder. I don't think I even get out a hello before I start apologizing profusely. I don't think I feel as bad when the student is closer to my age or even younger. But I feel like I have disrespected her *as my elder* by being late. Respect of elders is a big thing in my family and cultural background. (Within my socio-cultural background, the use of the word elder is a way of demonstrating respect. From an Africentric perspective, the term elder is synonymous with wisdom. When not relating my story, the term older person will be used).

I always felt guilty when those challenges that Miss Berta empathized with interfered with my ability to perform my role as mentor. I had a responsibility and I was not living up to it. In an effort to accommodate me, Miss Berta sat knowingly but silently because she understood the problems of handling multiple duties. I also "sat" silently but anxiously as I attempted to accommodate the time of my older student. We both experienced the situation in differing ways and rested uncomfortably but assuredly in the assumptions that framed our understanding of how to respect the other. But failure to explicitly communicate about the feelings raised by conflicts around practical issues like meeting times created uneasiness.

The reflexivity of this process illuminated additional ideas about respect. We each had constructed a definition of what respect meant and how it should be operationalized in our respective roles but these independently derived definitions created more problems than they solved as the following tales reveal. As a mentor, Dr. Lisa critiqued students' work. As GA and student researcher, Miss Berta fulfilled varied responsibilities. Both of us came to realize that respect encompassed more than being polite or even helpful or accommodating, it also involved recognizing the individual person in front of us and appreciating that interaction styles had to be tailored on a case by case basis.

I felt that my age, in particular, made it more difficult to adequately meet the expectations of Dr. Lisa. With older age comes lack of memory. I think this may bother me more than it does Dr. Lisa, but sometimes I sense a bit of impatience when I remember something a little bit wrong or just simply cannot recall the exact details of something. This symptom of aging is frustrating for both parties, especially when the intellect is the source of our endeavors. Eventually I expressed my insecurity.

Age was a factor for me but not because I thought Miss Berta's age was an impediment to the production of quality work but rather through working with her, I realized that I struggled even more with being critical of work that did not meet my expectations. I sometimes grew impatient with repeating directions and with explaining what I expected but these were feelings that I felt could not be expressed.

In working with Miss Berta, I identified in myself the following behavioral inclinations,

I am much more tentative with my remarks and comments to Miss Berta. I seem to use language that couches disappointment or even disagreement. Sometimes I sense a greater need for validation from Berta. I think her need for such a high level of validation was generational—you know the idea of the

teacher knows best. I am hypersensitive to not offending her and seeming like I am being sassy as my grandmother would say. I think I am much more straightforward and to the point with younger students. I get my point across in either case, I think, but am much more gentle with my criticism of Miss Berta. I do wonder if this is a disservice.

But I (Miss Berta) also identified an attitudinal inclination that exacerbated my anxiety around meeting expectations. I called it “just getting it done” and believed that this may have been due to the generational cohort work ethics that I came to age in.

I was raised to believe that a deadline is a deadline—it is not negotiable. For instance, if an assignment is due on a certain date, it *is due on that date—not a week later*. In addition, I was raised to meet the responsibilities of the job, no matter how difficult it is for me to do it. I guess you could say that my generation believes that the person in charge of a situation is the boss and it is our duty to follow instructions to the letter. If we don’t, or can’t, it is a failure. I would be embarrassed to ask for an extension for a task and would expect the professor or supervisor to question my ability and performance.

While I struggled with the notion of disrespecting Dr. Lisa by not being able to “just get it done,” Dr. Lisa struggled with how to communicate dissatisfaction to an older person. My reluctance to ask for help had the potential to create delays and a greater workload for me while Dr. Lisa’s timidity undermined her effectiveness in providing critical feedback. As the relationship progressed, Dr. Lisa developed a hyperawareness around how to respect me while at the same time providing correction. She cognitively knew that critical feedback was a sign of respect for any student regardless of age but emotionally struggled with being critical of students, like me, who were the same age as her parents. I knew that asking for clarification was part of the learning process but was reluctant to do so as it was taboo among my generation of learners. However, when we talked frankly about the relationship, we began to understand how to address the problems in ways that satisfied us. The paradoxical aspect of this is that neither of us knew the other was also struggling with how to operationalize our ideas of respect for the other.

Role Ambiguity

We experienced role ambiguity in the mentorship and this ambiguity was directly tied to our struggle to operationalize our definitions of respect within the relationship and sometimes resulted in a reversal of roles.

Role ambiguity became evident in our struggle to decide how to address each other. We had from the onset given explicit permission to address the other by our first name but neither of us felt comfortable with omitting the earned title. Hence we preferred to address the other with Miss and Doctor. For me (Dr. Lisa), age had everything to do with this discomfort. In my cultural tradition, anyone more than a generation away in age was referred to by a title. At church, women were called Sister X and the men were called Brother Y. Within the extended family, older relatives were also addressed as aunt, uncle, or cousin. In the broader community, older adults were referred to by Mr., Mrs., or Miss. To say anything to the contrary was considered as sassing, the ultimate sign of disrespect.

Interestingly my (Miss Berta’s) struggles with this issue were even more complex. From my generational perspective, it was disrespectful to address someone who held a formal position of authority, like a professor, by her first name. I felt compelled to call her Doctor.

But a more significant issue arose as we began working more closely. In many ways Dr. Lisa reminded me of my own children. They were the same age, seemed to have similar struggles, and were developing their careers. I was about the same age as Dr. Lisa's mother and at times in the relationship wanted to give her motherly advice but felt that it was inappropriate to do so. I had to resist saying, "Child, listen to what I have to tell you" or "Child, you need to give yourself some credit for the way you are able to meet the needs of a career, your students, your kids, and everybody else. Don't be so hard on yourself." After all, this is how I would address my own children who I intuitively knew needed some mother wit. Additionally, I often felt responsible, in a motherly way, for Dr. Lisa's feelings and comfort within the relationship and yet, felt that expressing concern might be inappropriate. I found myself choosing my words carefully and refraining from frank comments that might be perceived as criticism.

Respect as demonstrated in the previous theme for us amounted to more than just lip service to a title. With the title came a certain understanding of who the person was and behavior was governed accordingly in spite of our individual roles. This created ambiguity in our roles. I earned a title that Miss Berta felt compelled to honor but at the same time, my age stirred a natural inclination in Miss Berta to share motherly advice. Conversely, Miss Berta was the student seeking to expand her knowledge under my tutelage but due to Miss Berta's age, which also assumes a higher degree of wisdom, my natural inclination was to show respect by calling her Miss Berta. These thought processes exacerbated the role ambiguity between us, an ambiguity that created roadblocks and potholes in the mentorship.

Discussion

We discovered that conflicting power dynamics were common threads that tied issues bound in communication, respect, and role ambiguity together and allowed us to craft meaning from a seemingly disparate collection of experiences. French and Raven (1968) defined power as influence in a given situation and identified five major sources of power. Reward power results from having the power to give something wanted or take away something unwanted. It is similar to positive and negative reinforcement. Coercive power is netted from force and is often associated with punishment. Legitimate power is conferred based on authorial titles. A supervisor, by virtue of being the supervisor, has legitimate power. Referent power is drawn from a person who is revered, admired, or looked up to. The reasons for the reverence are varied. Charisma and popularity are just two. Expert power is earned based on the person's advanced knowledge, and skills. The sources of power may be enacted individually or in combination: This theory argues that the source of any power is found in the relationship between two or more people or as Burns (1978) wrote, it is found in relationships where "two or more persons *engage* with one another" (p. 11). Power is therefore always negotiable but often presumed based upon factors inherent in the relationship.

Most times individuals are operating within the realm of the taken for granted, the assumed, and the typical. Ball (as cited in Brockbank & McGill, 2006) indicates that this represents the "prevailing discourses" which are not only "about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships; they constitute both subjectivity and power relationships" (p. 15). In a traditional mentorship the balance and nature of power are clear. The mentor who is older, more experienced and knowledgeable holds the most power. But unlike a traditional mentorship, we both had legitimate power. Dr. Lisa's was derived from her position of assistant professor while mine was from life experience and lifelong education. Her role at the university also conferred upon her expert power while my age netted a nuanced form of

referent power. Subjectively, our acknowledgement of the other's power muddled our understandings of our prescribed roles.

The prevailing discourse prescribes what mentoring should be like and where power should rest. When the balance of power is typical, it facilitates a clearer understanding of not necessarily the expectations, because the average person seeking a mentor does so in hopes of learning something more, but rather a more clear understanding of how the mentor and mentee relate to the other. Brockbank and McGill (2006) call this a power nexus (p. 16) which is "largely ignored and kept invisible particularly to those who are powerless" (p. 16). The nexus of power exists within the "power horizon" (p. 16) which "is always just out of our sight" (p. 16) and is accepted as the way things should be. These notions of power nexus and power horizons are embedded within the social context which surrounds the mentorship. We have prescribed roles that are accompanied by anticipated expectations. When the balance of power is atypical, it can disrupt the prescribed nature of the relationship.

In mentorships whose members face role ambiguity both parties may feel powerless. We came to understand that we were operating under different power horizons. We were not aware of the other's understanding of the power dynamic in the relationship until we opened our individual horizons up to each other. Age acted as a cultural filter that hid expectations about the power inherent in the relationship: Miss Berta expected the power to be in my hands since I was the faculty member. However, I unconsciously conferred referent power to Miss Berta who came to the relationship with generational power because she was of the same generation as my mother. The power of these unconscious expectations exerted a strong influence over our behavior. Role ambiguity exacerbated this influence because it thwarted a more typical flow of power. To maximize the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship, we needed to recognize and deconstruct the ambiguity and make our expectations of each other explicit and visible. This meant redefining and developing a common power horizon wherein our various positionalities could be acknowledged.

Power also manifested itself across our communication patterns. As Hansman (2002) noted mentorships are hierarchical. Johnsrud (1991) wrote "the relationship between two women at substantially different stages of their academic careers, e.g., between the established scholar and the graduate student. . . . is not a peer or colleague relationship. Neither personal nor professional power in such a relationship is distributed equitably" (p. 9). In an upside-down mentorship, this imbalance of power represents a twist of operating from atypical power horizons. In these circumstances, power presents itself in a different way than that found when the student is considerably younger and considerably more inexperienced than the mentor. In our case the legitimate, expert and referent power was shared and multivoiced within and between our various positionalities: faculty-metaphorical daughter and student-metaphorical mother. These simultaneously held positionalities required renegotiation of strategies for communication and respect.

These social power structures were embedded in the way we communicated with each other. They impacted everything from what was said to who could say it to how it was said and when. Societal norms provided us with the clues to know the what, how and when of our speech acts, both verbal and non-verbal. When the societal norms in terms of power distribution are in conflict, such as is the case with a non-traditional intergenerational mentorship, the lines of communication become blurred. It becomes a question of whose power trumps whose or the question that we ultimately tangled with, does the one need to trump the other? Johnsrud (1991) notes, "both mentor and protégé are grappling with their own evolving sense of autonomy and connectedness, and their resolutions of this tension shape the quality of their relationship" (p. 8).

In our mentorship, we were both growing into our respective positionalities and we entered the relationship with a certain sense of ourselves as autonomous. Dr. Lisa was the

assistant professor. She was in charge. Miss Berta was the older, wiser woman. She was in charge. Guy (2002) reminds us that “mentoring is . . . fundamentally human, interpersonal, and value laden” (p. 27). We came to understand that our ability to form an effective mentorship rested on our ability to reconcile who was in charge, what our values were relative to assessing who should be in charge, and how to establish communication patterns that lent themselves to honoring that authority.

Finally, generational culture was recognized as the driving force behind our conceptualization and demonstration of respect for each other. As we progressed through the analysis, we noticed how elements of age, as a cross-cultural factor, were relevant to our relationship. The extant literature notes relationship dynamics are mediated by same culture identification. While we did share some cultural elements such as being women, being mothers, being liberal, we differed on others. Although one might assume that race was the root of conflict, this issue did not play a significant role in the mentorship but the generational age differences did.

We experienced the discomfort of cross-cultural mentoring due to the generational age gap being reversed within our mentoring relationship. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2002) realized what an asset being of the same generation could be in a mentorship. In spite of racial and gender difference, they wrote “our generational understandings of the world . . . afforded a common basis on which to build a relationship” (p. 15). Commonality in age served as a mediator “within the political and social hierarchies in which” (p. 22) they lived. I (Miss Berta) attested to this while recalling my experience of mentorship with a mentor closer to my age,

We were far more relaxed and were able to develop our relationship more quickly. We often met in his office for extended meetings where we shared cheese he brought back from Ireland. Our discussions were far-ranging and involved shared reading and thoughtful discussion of our past experiences. His schedule seemed to be more relaxed, which becomes possible at a certain age and place in one’s career.

Contemporaries share a sort of “shorthand” language that reflects shared cultural knowledge and references. We frequently used “long-hand” language as a result of our age difference.

Mentorships can be complicated by any number of factors. Through our auto-ethnographic exploration, we discovered a great deal about ourselves that not only helped to improve the effectiveness of our mentorship but also resulted in better understanding how to more effectively function in our respective roles: Miss Berta became a better student and I became a better professor. Consequently, this inverted mentorship proved to be one of the most valuable relationships of our educational careers and we appreciated that in working through our relationship that our generational cultures need not collide.

Parting Reflections

Miss Berta afforded me unconditional support which bolstered my confidence as a junior faculty member. When I doubted my destiny, she assured me that I was on the right path. She expressed appreciation for my interest in her holistic development which reminded me of the importance of recognizing mentees as people first, and students second. The cultural context of the learner always matters.

Dr. Lisa offered me academic support as she assisted me in moving from beginning student to confident doctoral candidate. In fact, I had no intention of moving beyond the masters program until she encouraged me to apply to doctoral programs. As Dr. Lisa does

with all her students, she expected excellence and modeled professionalism and academic rigor thus providing me with professional support through our various collaborations. Now as an advanced doctoral student, I find myself passing on advice and information learned from my young mentor to beginning graduate students. My first piece of advice is always to find a good mentor who shares your interests and is interested in your success.

Mentors are gate watchers who unlock the gates of academia and accompany students on their educational journeys. But if cross-cultural dynamics, such as age, are not consciously attended to, mentors can become gatekeepers, keeping students from fulfilling their potential. By appreciating the power horizon and power nexus within our relationship and how both were mediated by cultural differences wrought by age, we developed necessary understandings for negotiating intergenerational tensions. Our mentorship has continued to be a valuable source of support for both of us and has flourished, in part, because we were willing to delve into the complicated dynamics of our upside-down mentorship. Mentoring, especially among non-traditional intergenerational pairs, is not always smooth and easy but the journey you travel together has benefits beyond what you could ever imagine. For us, it is worth the trip.

References

- Anderson, D. (2005). The importance of mentoring programs to women's career advancement in Biotechnology. *Journal of Career Development*, 32(1), 60-73. doi: 10.1177/0894845305277039
- Barker, M. (2007). Cross-cultural mentoring in institutional contexts. *Negro Educational Review*, 58(1-2), 85-103.
- Brinson, J., & Kottler, J. (1993). Cross-cultural mentoring in counselor education: A strategy for retaining minority faculty. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 32(4), 241-254.
- Brockbank, A., & McGill, I. (2006). *Facilitating reflective learning through mentoring and coaching*. London, UK & Philadelphia, PA: Kogan Page Limited.
- Brookfield, S. (2006). *The skillful teacher on technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bruce, M. A. (1995). Mentoring women doctoral students: What counselor educators and supervisors can do. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 35(2), 139-150.
- Burns, J. (1978). *Leadership*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.
- Cary, S. (2008). Mentoring generations today for tomorrow's leaders. *Nephrology Nursing Journal*. 35(2), 118-119.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Cohen, N. (1995). *Mentoring adult learners: A guide for educators and trainers*. Malabar, FL: Kreiger.
- Crisp, G. (2009). Conceptualization and initial validation of the college student mentoring scale (CSMS). *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(2), 177-194.
- Crutcher, N. (2007). Mentoring across cultures. *The Education Digest*, 73(4), 21-25.
- Daloz, L. A. (1999). *Mentor: Guiding the journey of adult learners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Duff, C. (1999). *Learning from other women*. NY: American Management Association.
- Dunbar, D., & Kinnersley, T. (2011). Mentoring female administrators toward leadership success. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 77(3), 17-24. doi: 10.1080/13611260903448318
- Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- French, J., & Raven, B. (1968). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright & A. Zander (Eds.), *Group dynamics* (3rd ed., pp. 259-268). New York: Harper & Row.
- Gardiner, M., Enomoto, E., & Grogan, M. (2000). *Coloring outside the lines: Mentoring women into school leadership*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gardiner, M., Tiggeman, M., Kearns, H., & Marshall, K. (2007). Show me the money! An empirical analysis of mentoring outcomes for women in academia. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 26(4), 424-442. doi: 10.1080/07294360701658633
- Guy, T. (2002). Telementoring: Shaping mentoring relationships for the 21st Century. In C. Hansman (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on mentoring: Trends and issues, Information Series no. 388* (pp. 27-38). Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, & Vocational Education Center on Education and Training for Employment. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University
- Hadjioannou, X., Shelton, N., Fu, D., & Dhanarattigannon, J. (2007). The road to a doctoral degree: Co-travelers through a perilous passage. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 160-177.
- Dunbar, D., & Kinnersley, T. (2011). Mentoring female administrators toward leadership success. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 77(3), 17-24. doi: 10.1080/13611260903448318
- Hamilton, M., Hamilton, S., & Rhodes, J. (2002). Why mentoring in the workplace works. In J. Rhodes (Ed.), *A critical view of youth mentoring* (pp. 59-83): Issue 93 *New Directions for Youth Development*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Hansman, C. (2002). Diversity and power in mentoring relationships. In C. Hansman (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on mentoring: Trends and issues, Information Series no. 388* (pp. 39-48). Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, & Vocational Education Center on Education and Training for Employment. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University
- Healey, J. (2006). *Race, ethnicity, gender, and class: The sociology of group conflict and change* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.
- Ishiyama, J. (2007). Expectations and perceptions of undergraduate mentoring: Comparing first generation, low-income White/Caucasian and African American students. *College Student Journal*, 41(3), 540-549.
- Johnson, B., & Ridley, C. (2004). *The elements of mentoring*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson-Bailey, J. & Cervero, R. (2002). Cross-cultural mentoring as a context for learning. In M. Alfred (Ed.), *Learning and sociocultural contexts: Implications for adults, community, and workplace education* (pp. 15-26): Issue 96. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Johnsrud, L. (1991). Mentoring between academic women: The capacity for interdependence. *Initiatives*, 54(3), 7-17.
- Krader, C. (2010). Mentoring the millennial mind. *Ophthalmology Times*, 35(22), 1-9
- Maher, M., Ford, M., & Thompson, C. (2004). Degree progress of women doctoral students: Factors that constrain, facilitate, and differentiate. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(3), 385-408.
- Moore, C. (2000). Women graduate students on mentoring. *Profession*, 149-156.
- Moody, J. (2004). *Faculty diversity: Problems and solutions*. NY: Routledge Falmer.
- NCES. (n.d.). Trends in nontraditional student enrollment. US Department of Education Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578f.asp>

- Nora, A., & Crisp, G. (2007). Mentoring students: Conceptualizing and validating the multi-dimensions of a support system. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice* 9(3), 333-356. Doi: 10.2190/cs.9.3.e
- Packard, B. (2003). Web-based mentoring: Challenging traditional models to increase women's access. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 11(1), 53-65.
- Paterson, B., & Hart-Wasekeesikaw, F. (1994). Mentoring women in higher education: Lessons from the elders. *College Teaching*, 42(2), 72-77.
- Shaunessy, P. (2009). Reaching millennials through innovations in teaching. *Perspectives on Issues in Higher Education*. 12, 4-15. doi:10.1044/ihe12.1.4
- Walker, J (2006). Reconceptualization of mentoring in counselor education: Using a relational model to promote mutuality and embrace differences. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education, and Development*, 45(Spring), 60-69.
- Walker, K. (2009). Excavating the millennial teacher mine. *NASSP Bulletin*, 93(1), 73-77.
- Wunch, M. (1994). Giving structure to experience: Mentoring strategies for women faculty. *Initiatives*, 56(1), 1-10.
- Young, S. (2009). Half and half: An (auto) ethnography of hybrid identities in a Korean American mother-daughter relationship. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 2(2), 139-167. doi: 10.1080/17513050902759512

Author Note

Lisa R. Merriweather is an assistant professor of Adult Education at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Her primary research interests revolve around race and equity in adult education. She can be contacted at Lisa R. Merriweather, Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership, 9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28223; Email: lmerriwe@uncc.edu

Alberta J. Morgan is a doctoral candidate in Adult, Higher, and Community Education at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. She can be contacted at Alberta J. Morgan, M.A., Ball State University, Department of Educational Studies, Muncie, IN 47306; Email: ajmorgan@bsu.edu

Copyright 2013: Lisa R. Merriweather, Alberta J. Morgan, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Merriweather, L. R., & Morgan, A. J. (2013). Two cultures collide: Bridging the generation gap in a non-traditional mentorship. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(Art. 12), 1-16. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/merriweather12.pdf>
