CHAPTER 6

Facilitating Liberatory Relationships for Women of Color in Academia Through Mentorship

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Key Terms and Definitions

Liberationships: Mutually beneficial relationships that empower all parties to reach their personally-defined goals while addressing systemic barriers.

Liberation: Critical transformation that can only happen after one can name systemic level oppressions (Harro, 2018).

Mentorship: A relationship in which a more experienced person teaches what a lesser experienced person needs to know generally tied to career advancement (Alarcón & Bettez, 2017) usually including role modeling, psychosocial function, and professional development (Grant & Ghee, 2015).

Mutual relationships: Relationships in which those involved bring their whole selves, are responsible for their own choices, and share knowledge and learning (hooks, 1998).

Transformative learning: Learning that makes a person shift their epistemology or "how" they know (Snipes & LePeau, 2017).

In this chapter we share about the history of Women of Color in higher education, the pervasive marginalization of their presence and perspectives, and the need for liberatory relationships. Liberatory relationships can take the form of mentorship through intentional use of critical teaching pedagogy; critical

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pedagogies support the development of transformative mentorship relationships that acknowledge power and provide opportunities for conversations that situate the individual within systems of oppression to learn and develop through so that persistence in higher education can be achieved with the least amount of marginalization (hooks, 1998; Rendón, 2009; Snipes & LePeau, 2017). We highlight ethnographic research we conducted on the mentoring relationships between three Women of Color (two of whom authored this chapter) spanning 19 years to give more language to the unique, transformational, and liberatory aspects of these relationships. By approaching mentorship through critical pedagogies, mentoring relationships have developed into spaces of transformative learning, liberation and as sites as resistance to systemic power imbalances and inequities at a predominantly white institution.

In this chapter, we outline the core themes and valuable attributes necessary for the success of these relationships that emerged from this original research study. We present in detail the theoretical *Liberatory Mentorship for Women of Color* model liberatory mentorship model that we use to describe such relationships; we present the model with reflection questions to help readers prepare for the implementation of this research-based approach to improve student experiences. The final component of the chapter includes guidance for how to intentionally facilitate such partnerships using the recently developed model with considerations for program administrators, mentors, and mentees.

Liberatory Mentorship

While there is much research about "mentorship," the term is unsettling for each of us and does not adequately describe our relationships with other Women of Color that have helped to sustain our work in higher education (McAloney & Long, 2018). Therefore, we embarked on a research study to gain insight into the uniqueness of our relationships, to identify characteristics about our relationships, and name the multigenerational liberatory mentorship experiences that we have (McAloney & Long, 2018). Our experiences as Women of Color attending, working at, and resisting from the margins a historically white institution as well as our pedagogical notions of education have deeply connected us and shaped our development (McAloney & Long, 2018; Squire et al., 2016).

An important component of self-development is transformative learning (Snipes & LePeau, 2017). Liberatory personal development for people with oppressed identities (i.e. Women of Color) can only take place through mentorships that situate the individual within societal systems of power and oppression (Harro, 2018). This development can come through liberatory notions of education, mentorship relationships, learning partnerships, education spaces in which both parties can be co-constructors of knowledge, and reflection (Friere, 1970; hooks, 1998; Rendón, 2009; Snipes & LePeau, 2017).

We offer this work to document and explore mentorship relationships that can be counter-narrative to historical notions of mentorship with hopes to influence the thinking as mentorship relationships are facilitated, formed, and strengthened. Considering ourselves and our relationships as the sites of our research, we sought to "reconceptualize our narratives of interpretation" about our mentoring relationships (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 3). As the researchers' deep, impactful relationships have transitioned and grown into the depth to what they are now, we explored our relationships, how they changed over time, the impact of our relationships on our lives, and what we name the type of relationships we have. We sought to examine our individual relationships, group affiliations, and institutional structures that impact our relationships (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). This experience offers a model counter-narrative to current mentorship models and their inherent maintenance of white supremacy.

History of Women of Color in Higher Education

At historically white institutions, Women of Color can be isolated, alienated, and experience social marginalization and feelings of invisibility (Enomoto et al., 2000; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2002). Sotello Viernes Turner (2002) stated that working in higher education institutions is a lived contradiction with ambiguous empowerment, tokenization, and constantly being defined out and not in. Ambiguous empowerment is when Women of Color are placed in situations where their authority is limited, and, then in addressing these situations, are drained of their energy (Sotello Viernes Turner, 2002). This tokenization and being defined by others is taxing (Enomoto et al., 2000; Sotello Viernes Turner, 2002; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2002).

Microaggressions, when happening at work, can lead to high rates of depression, isolation, and absenteeism, which often results in reprimanding, negative performance evaluations, and even dismissal (Torino et al., 2019). One's mental and physical well-being can also be influenced by microaggressions in the following ways: higher rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, alcohol abuse, eating disorders, self-constructs such as achievement aspirations, pain, and fatigue (Torino et al., 2019). Furthermore, these negative personal impacts can lower a Woman of Color's ability to achieve salary increases and promotion at work (Torino et al., 2019). Existing in a predominantly white-man-dominated administration and society poses unique challenges to a Woman of Color's self-esteem and career productivity (Enomoto et al., 2000; Torino et al., 2019).

Given this reality for Women of Color working within higher education, "emerging scholars and practitioners who intend to excel in their respective professions have the opportunity to make connections and learn how to successfully maneuver within their areas of specialization" (Enomoto et al., 2000; Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 67). One way to make these connections and gain these critical lessons is through mentorship. Sotello Viernes Turner (2002) states that mentorship is a key component for "individual and group

success and progress" (p. 84) and that mentors can help address power and power relationships within the institution: "we can define ourselves in and claim unambiguous empowerment, creating discourses that address our realities, affirm our intellectual contributions, and seriously examine our worlds" (Sotello Viernes Turner, 2002, p. 89).

Early definitions of mentoring state that mentors guide, teach, and counsel (Enomoto et al., 2000; Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 68). Mentoring is the cornerstone to success from which comes student-faculty relationships built on humanness, a desire to create hybrid identities, and engage in praxis (Snipes & LePeau, 2017) propelled by "trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding" (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 68). All of this make mentoring one of the "salient factors in academic and career success" in higher education (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 67) as "individual views or horizons for (be)coming scholars were expanded through the learning partnership" (Snipes & LePeau, 2017, p. 593). For Women of Color,

> participating in mentoring relationships with someone who looks like them, who has similar personal, professional, and scholarly interests and is developed to their holistic experience and personal success as a graduate student in their chosen field, is keenly important for African American women and other Students of Color. (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 68)

The mentor needs to have a belief in the protégé caring about their success, engage with a relationship of care, and both parties need to have mutual respect and perceive the relationship as mutually beneficial or reciprocal (Enomoto et al., 2000).

Liberatory relationships can take the form of mentorship through intentional use of critical teaching pedagogy, which supports the development of transformative mentorship relationships that acknowledge power and create opportunities for conversations that situate the individual within systems of oppression to learn and develop through so that persistence in higher education can be achieved with the least amount of marginalization (hooks, 1998; Rendón, 2009; Snipes & LePeau, 2017). Liberatory relationships are necessary for Women of Color given our history in higher education. Liberatory relationships position mentors as educators and facilitators. Throughout this chapter, we will use the term educator. Whether one is tenure-track faculty, student affairs practitioners, or academic affairs staff, we all have roles as educators with students and one another.

Approaching Mentorship Through Critical Pedagogy

Mentorship is a form of teaching and passing along knowledge (Sotello Viernes Turner, 2002). With this definition of mentorship as teaching, this literature review will begin with liberatory teaching pedagogies to set up

a standpoint of Women of Color mentorship coming from community of colorways of knowing.

Teaching pedagogies that have been developed that center the student, position the educator as a co-learner, and hold community and reflection as key components (hooks, 1998; Rendón, 2009). Sentipensante pedagogy (Rendón, 2009) and engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1998) center educators and Students of Color, first generation, and other communities historically denied access to higher edaction. As work with students is reimagined, intentional educators can use tools of liberation to rupture the status quo and create transformative experiences for students.

Much of mentorship work with students, which can be approached in a way that engages the whole student, is liberatory and, at its core, is justice work. Such scholars as Friere (1970), hooks (1998), and Rendón (2009) discuss liberatory pedagogies in the context of the classroom, but not other teaching forms. Rendón (2009) describes sentipensante pedagogy as integrating sensing and thinking into our learning, connecting to ways that people have learned for centuries. This liberatory learning approach is a union of sensing and thinking and engages intuition, subjectiveness, contemplation, human community, humanism, and personal development (Rendón, 2009). Hooks (1998) suggests that through engaged pedagogy, educating so any person can learn is "the practice of freedom" (p. 13) and is essential for an individual's most deep learning. Educators are called to be healers and teach students how to "live in the world" (hooks, p. 15). Engaged pedagogy asks educators to be vulnerable, share, and to "make their teaching practices a site of resistance" (hooks, 1998, p. 21).

Both Rendón (2009) and Hooks' (1998) work centers individuals and the learning community, and asks educators to provide and create spaces that are liberatory and transformative through engaging with students as whole beings who bring knowledge that the entire learning community, including faculty, can learn from. Knowing this, our research provides a way to approach mentorship relationships as teaching spaces where both individuals are able to bring their full selves, experience deep learning, and liberate their work in higher education. Engaged pedagogy and sentipensante pedagogy provide opportunities for liberatory mentorship.

Engaged Pedagogy

Engaged pedagogy calls on educators, mentors, to work toward self-actualization (hooks, 1998). This is an acknowledgment that mentors are still learning and are continuing to actively engage in their own growth. With this work toward self-actualization, the educator and students engage in building a learning community together (hooks, 1998). This learning community and experience is modeled by the educator, mentor, and needs the buy-in from the mentee (hooks, 1998). Third, engaged pedagogy provides that the mentor

and mentee engage in a relationship in which they hold one another's humanness central within their relationship (hooks, 1998). Finally, engaged pedagogy allows for students to bring their whole selves to the work (hooks, 1998). This opens the possibilities for mentees to bring their whole selves, their lived experiences, and knowledge to the mentorship relationship.

Sentipensante Pedagogy

Similar to engaged pedagogy, sentipensante pedagogy calls on educators and learners, mentors and mentees, to bring their whole selves to the mentorship relationship (Rendón, 2009). Using sentipensante pedagogy in mentorship includes fostering critical awareness, working with diverse ways of knowing and being, and engaging about creating change as compassionate beings that help mentees:

- Find purpose, voice, and self-worth
- Recognize social inequalities and taking action
- View themselves as capable and contributors
- Dismantle negative beliefs they may have of themselves (Rendón, 2009).

Critical and liberatory pedagogies are frameworks we can utilize in multiple areas of our work, like mentorship, because we are educators. These pedagogies offer us ways of thriving in higher education based on ways in which many minoritized communities have been operating for centuries and were the theories through which we explored our mentorship relationships.

Methods

In 2017, we (Kim and Jenesis), as well as the additional person in our mentorship triad, began to reflect that our mentorship relationships were different than we had experienced with others. The opportunity to explore these mentorship relationships presented itself as Kim was tasked with a research assignment in an ethnography methods class. Given this opportunity, the three of us decided to engage in a duo ethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) to research what it is about our relationships that make them unique and sustainable. The research questions for this study were: What is unique about our relationships that began as student-faculty and are now colleague-colleague? What components of our relationship are mentorship and what components are different from mentorship? How do we describe the shifting dynamics/positions within our relationships?

Population

We are Women of Color who work in higher education and have earned graduate degrees. We come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural communities, and were first-generation college students. Each of us engaged in mentorship relationships with one another individually, and it was after Jenesis started working as a higher education professional that the three of us began to also work together as a group. Between the three of us, we have 19 years of mentorship experience with one another at the time of the study. Adding each of our years of service together, we have worked in higher education for over 50 years. We have worked in advising, dean of students work, teaching, and in units that support students historically denied access to higher education.

The present study was conducted after we had worked together for almost 20 years. Jenesis and Kim were both undergraduate students when we had our first mentoring relationships; we all met because of the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) which facilitated our formal mentorship relationships. The relationships continued through Jenesis and Kim's master's programs and then through Kim's doctoral program. Through our schooling experiences, we served for one another as internship supervisors, advisors, and on Honors thesis and/or graduate committees. In our work lives and in various combinations, we have taught together, served on committees, presented on campus, regionally and nationally, led conferences, and published.

Data Collection

We engaged in five video-recorded, semi-structured open conversations (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Four interviews discussed our relationships, how the mentorships came to be, describing the shifting dynamics of the relationships, and discussing how the relationships are a unique type of mentorship. Each interview began and ended with reflection about how each participant's thinking may have shifted or deepened throughout the conversation. In the fifth interview, we engaged in a conversation about our pre- and post-interview reflections. We had guiding questions for each conversation with sub-questions to guide follow-up conversation.

Analytic Methods

We transcribed and coded through thematic coding (Gall et al., 2007). We engaged with theming the data individually and then met to discuss themes we each found. This allowed us to deepen and strengthen our understanding of the data and the codes we developed. For member checking, throughout the analysis process, we met in our mentorship triad to share our in-progress

findings in order to ensure our themes were accurate representations of our mentorship relationships.

Liberatory Mentorship for Women of Color

The Liberatory Mentorship for Women of Color Model describes three aspects of mentorship–who, what, and why (Fig. 6.1).

Who

The first layer of the model is identified as who and has three shared attributes: acknowledge power, shared identity, and desire for growth. Acknowledging power is the willingness and ability to engage around how socially oppressed identities play out in our relationships as we have made a space in which we can evaluate ourselves and reflect with one another in ways that situate the experiences within the everyday experiences we have. Secondly, there is a shared understanding we have because of our overlapping shared identities as Women of Color, educators, and each coming from a low-income background. Because of these shared identities, similar questions and concerns have arisen as we navigate our work as well as shifts in our personal and professional roles. For example, we had shifts in our socioeconomic class as we moved from student to career professional and again as we advanced through our career. We were able to connect with one another about the ways we viewed ourselves through this shift and how we related during and through these

Fig. 6.1 The liberatory mentorship for Women of Color model (McAloney & Long, 2018)

shifts with those closest to us. Third, we all share the specific value of a desire for being our best selves and continually growing. This desire for growth is evident by our interest in working as educators, our pursuit of knowledge, and this research project. This desire for growth has kept us engaged, humble, and honest with ourselves about the areas of our lives, professionally and personally, that we need support and in which we want to develop. These three foundational attributes of acknowledging (individual and systemic) power, having a shared identity, and a shared desire for growth have been foundational to our relationship allowing for both depth and complexity.

How

The second layer of the model is identified as how and describes how we connect within our relationships: reciprocity, reflection, and resistance. The first approach, reciprocity, is shown through investment, authenticity, and trust. Each of us show up as our whole selves and we are each invested in the relationship with one another. This authenticity and investment build trust and are the foundation for reciprocity and allow for the relationships to be beneficial for all those involved in the relationship. The second foundational approach is reflection. It is through reflection that we connect with one another's experiences through our shared identity and caucusing as well as our shared desire for growth. Reflection is both a function of the relationship as well as a tool used within it. The third and final approach is resistance to systems of oppression. This requires us to have an awareness and acknowledgment of our social identities as well as how our identities are positioned within the academy and our desire to do our work thoughtfully and with intentionality.

The academy was not designed for us. What does it mean to be Women of Color from low-income backgrounds working within a system built and maintained for elite, white men? This resistance space is a way for us to not only support one another, but to encourage us to make changes and shifts within the academy that will benefit those coming after us. While the need for mentorship of Women of Color is clear for survival, being within these margins of the institutions, Women of Color can build communities of resistance. Thomas and Hollenshead (2002) quote bell hooks writing about the margins as a place one stays in "clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (p. 167) and "a location of radical openness and possibility" (p. 166). Reciprocity, reflection, and resistance allow our relationships to get stronger and allow us to connect with our purposeful work within the academy.

Why

The third and final layer of the model is why we continue to cultivate our relationships. From these relationships, we each grow, are validated, and have increased work productivity. Throughout this research, there was an acknowledgment of growth that each participant experienced because of the mentorship relationships she was engaged with the others. This growth was in both personal and professional areas of our lives and as the relationship evolved and deepened, this new growth showed up through new ways of thinking and behaving. Second, validation of ourselves, our experiences, and how we understood the world was another outcome of the mentorship relationships. Specifically, this validation supported us through toxic relationships and navigating the imposter syndrome and bureaucracy within our historically white institution. Each of us, the participants, share similar values and desires about why we work in higher education specifically. This increases our work productivity through engaging together on meaningful work projects. An example of this is this research examining the nature of our relationships and the development of this model. Through our relationships and the nature of our relationships, we are consistently challenging and supporting one another to further the work we are passionate about both personally and professionally.

Finally, this model has multiple connected and interconnected circles. This emulates the cyclical nature of our relationships that are ever changing and growing. This model offers a way to analyze the complexity of mentorship relationships and encourage others to consider how they engage, why they engage, and who they are engaged with in terms of mentoring. Given this model and our understanding of our unique form of mentorship we would like to offer "liberationships" as a way to name and describe these relationships. We define liberationships as mutually beneficial relationships that empower all parties to reach their personally-defined goals while addressing systemic barriers.

Conclusion

We offer this chapter to document and explore our relationships as a counter-narrative to historical notions of mentorship. This duo ethnography research on three multigenerational relationships spanning 19 years between three Women of Color to provide more language to the unique, transformational, and liberatory aspects of these relationships. Through approaching mentorship with critical pedagogies, such as engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1998) and sentipensante pedagogy (Rendón, 2009), these relationships have developed into spaces of transformative learning, liberation and as sites as resistance to the systemic power and inequities at a historically white institution that we call liberationships. Again, liberationships are mutually beneficial relationships that empower all parties to reach their personally-defined goals while addressing systemic barriers. It is these liberationships that allow us to bring our whole

selves to work, engage in meaningful relationships, and sustain ourselves as Women of Color in higher education. We hope that the theoretical model of *Liberatory Mentorship for Women of Color* can be used to describe such relationships that currently exist, and inspire new relationships to enhance their approach. The following artifact can be copied for personal reflection and group dialogue.

Appendix: Facilitating Liberationships Questions

For current mentors and mentees to better understand the *Liberatory Mentorship Women of Color* model, consider the following questions to further expand your understanding of how your own experiences fit within the model.

Reflection process to engage with the "who" layer of the model: Brainstorm a list about your past mentorship experiences. Were their shared values represented in your relationships? If so, which? What identities were most salient for you in these relationships? And, how do you know? Were you and those you were in relationship with able and willing to engage in conversations about individual and systemic power? If so, how was this demonstrated? Was a shared desire for growth demonstrated? If so, how?

Reflection process to engage with the "how" layer of the model: What are your beliefs about the roles and expectations of mentors and mentees? How should vulnerability and reflection show up in mentorship relationships? How are boundaries set in mentorship relationships? What qualities/characteristics move a relationship from student/faculty to colleague? Has resistance shown up in your past mentorship relationships? If so, how?

Reflection process to engage with the "why" layer of the model: What personal growth are you most interested in prioritizing at this time? What areas of your identity do you feel could benefit from increased validation? What work/passion projects would you like to see increased productivity in? Who might you want to develop a mentorship relationship with to reach your goals? How do you find a balance between your desire for work productivity, and your need for personal growth and validation?

For program administrators, mentors, and mentees looking to intentionally facilitate relationships using the *Liberatory Mentorship Women of Color* model, consider the following reflection questions:

Program Administrators

- Who will be invited to participate and how?
- What kind of orientation/training process will you provide?
- How will biases be mitigated and addressed?
- Who will mentors and mentees refer questions or concerns to?
- What are the outcomes you will measure? *(Possibilities: number of contacts, self-reported feelings of belongingness and support, number of referral to resources, written reflections about experience)*

Mentors

- What makes you want to be a mentor and to who?
- Who do you want to mentor and why?
- What does being a mentor mean to you?
- What areas do I focus on most when talking with my mentees?
- What is problematic about the term mentorship?
- What boundaries do you need in the relationship for it to succeed? *(Consider time, topics of conversations, frequency of contacts, communication channels)*

Mentees

- What do you hope to gain from your mentorship experience?
- Who do you wish to be mentored by and why?
- What will you need to feel supported by your mentor?
- What boundaries do you need in the relationship for it to succeed? *(Consider time, topics of conversations, frequency of contacts, communication channels)*

Suggestions for Further Reading

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