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The Experiences of Minority Women Leaders as Mentees in U.S. Organizations

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Mentoring has been described as an important aspect of organizational socialization and career development that can positively influence career success. If minority women leaders generally do not have influential or powerful mentors, what are the implications for their career development and presence in senior leadership positions? Studies show that in most organizations, women of color do not fare well when it comes to mentoring and as a result, they overall lack the same level of career development and influential connections as Caucasians. This qualitative study explored the experiences of minority women leaders as mentees and the impact of this experience on their careers. The study found that career and psychosocial functions of the mentoring experience were consistent across age and ethnic background, and that informal mentoring was preferred over formal programs.

Generally, researchers point to the lack of mentoring in the work lives of minority women and suggest that this shortfall tends to limit the presence of minority women in senior positions (Athey, Avery, & Zemsky, 2000; Bahniuk & Hill, 1998). The lack of mentoring and the subsequent lack of opportunities and substantive career movement to the top, beyond the “concrete ceiling,” are said to be barriers for minority women in U.S. companies (Catalyst, 2004). The term, “concrete ceiling,” is similar to the term, “glass ceiling,” defined as those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management level positions, only denser and not as easily shattered (Moore & Jones, 2001).

Some researchers claim that it is not that minority women are not being mentored at all, but believe that they do not have the right types of influential mentors and sponsors who can have an impact on their journey to the top of organizations (Catalyst, 2004). While there is abundant research about mentoring in organizations, there is little that specifically focuses upon the experiences of minority women leaders as mentees.

Research that focuses on minority women and work is particularly significant now because the face of America is changing. The U.S. Census Bureau (1999) has predicted that

Caucasians, long considered the majority, will drop below 50 % of the population by the year 2050. However, experts say that new data suggests that this shift could come far sooner. Moreover, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) projects that over 27 million minority women will be in the workforce by 2010. Although still lagging behind Caucasians, college enrollment and graduation rates among minorities are rising steadily according to the American Council on Education's 2008 report on the status of minorities in higher education. The report also shows that 42% of African Americans and 37% of Hispanic college enrollees are women. American workplaces may become increasingly populated by educated minority women who may no longer want to be held just below the concrete ceiling for leadership positions.

Mentoring may be just one facet of career development for leaders, but research suggests that mentoring leads to increased performance and promotion rate, early career advancement, greater upward mobility, higher income, greater job satisfactions, enhanced leadership ability, and perceptions of greater success and influence in an organization (Bahniuk & Hill, 1998).

This qualitative study explored the experiences of minority women leaders as mentees in American business environments and the impact of the mentoring relationships on their career and psychosocial development.

Definitions

Mentoring is commonly defined in the literature as a relationship, often internal within an organization, when a more experienced person (the mentor) provides support and a role model for a less experienced person (the mentee) (Bahniuk & Hill, 1998; Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). The mentoring relationship can be one that is formal as in organizationally structured mentoring programs with established processes or informal, those relationships that emerge from social relationships and networks (Beyene et al.).

For the purpose of the study, women of color and minorities refers to non-Caucasian women as defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: African American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Hispanic/Latin, and Native American. Leader refers to those who have staff reporting to them, are organizational officers, or who manage an organizational function.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explored:

1. What are the formal and informal experiences of minority women leaders as mentees in American organizations?
2. What are the career and psychosocial benefits for minority women leaders who participate in mentoring as mentees?
3. How do their experiences as mentees influence the careers of minority women leaders?
4. What are the types of support minority women leaders receive through formal or informal relationships as mentees?

Method

Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions, the data needed to describe the lived experiences of the participants as mentees in formal and informal mentoring relationships.

Data were collected from 7 participants using a semi-structured interview framework. A semi-structured interview format was used to allow for flexibility and openness leaving the dialogues open to exploration (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). The interviews, which lasted from 24 to 48 minutes, employed a series of open-ended questions that provided a frame of reference for the interviewees, but at the same time minimally restrained their answers and expressions (Kerlinger & Lee).

The interviews were conducted by phone and recorded. Some participants were not comfortable with interviewing in their work environment, so some interviews took place during non-work time and outside of the work environment. As the solo researcher, I conducted the interviews and transcribed the recordings for analysis. Notes were taken during the interview to reflect my perceptions of the individuals as they recounted experiences and expressed their thoughts and feelings about being mentored.

Interview questions (see Appendix A) were drawn from the literature and categorized by behavior and experience, opinions, feelings, what the participants have seen or heard, participant knowledge, and individual demographics. The questions were reviewed by a professor and the diversity department of my employer.

Funnel questions were used to reach specific points of the mentoring experience. Warwick and Lininger (as cited by Kerlinger & Lee, 2000) pointed out that funnel type questions allow free response, narrow down to specific questions and responses, and also facilitate the discovery of respondents' frames of reference. For example, when asked about her perception of mentoring, one participant's response was very short, reflecting one concept, coaching. To discover her expectations of her mentoring relationship with her manager, I asked what behaviors she expected when approaching her manager. This approach took her perspective beyond the single concept of coaching to guidance, suggestions, and the ability to bounce ideas off someone.

Demographic information of the participants was collected, but only some of the information (age, race, industry, time in current position, length of service in the organization, and current work status) was used in this report to preserve anonymity of participants. Appendix B provides a profile of all 7 participants, and their comments are identified by a corresponding number throughout the report.

Participants

A racially diverse mix of minority women leaders was sought for the study. I looked for women from different organizations and industries who are Asian, Black, African American, Hispanic, and Native American who have held or currently hold leadership positions. Finding a racially diverse slate of minority participants was more difficult than anticipated, particularly finding Asian, Hispanic, and Native American women in leadership positions. Two Hispanic women were scheduled for interviews, but neither was able to participate. I believe that a diverse mix of participants allows for in-depth descriptions of experiences across race, ethnicities,

cultures, organizations, and geographic locations and reduces the possibility of researcher bias. The participant search resulted in a small sample of 7 racially and culturally diverse minority women leaders.

The participants were identified through referrals from business associates and my own personal acquaintances. Two of the participants are my personal acquaintances. Another participant works at the same company where I work, but I have never met her personally. I used the snowball or chain sampling approach by asking participants if they knew of others that I should talk to. The rest of the participants were either referrals from acquaintances or other study participants.

Several African American women surfaced through a women's forum at a technology company and resulted in one full interview and one partial interview which was interrupted by technical difficulties. Before directly contacting the women, I gained permission from the forum's leader who distributed an email to the African American women who are part of the forum. Four women agreed to participate, however not all responded to my email request to establish a time or to my follow-up phone calls.

An Asian participant was the result of a referral and she recommended two other women. Participants include women aged 31 to 58, currently in or retired from leadership positions in U.S. organizations (see Appendix B for participant profiles). Study participants are located in Connecticut, Illinois, and New York. Industries include technology, education, financial services, and marketing information. All participants, except one, had some type of formal or informal organizational mentoring experience.

Informed Consent

An informed consent protocol (see Appendix C) was developed to inform participants of the purpose of collecting information and how it would be used. Participants were provided with an email prior to the interview and told at the start of the conversation what the interview would entail and how responses would be handled (Patton, 2002). All participants agreed to the interviews, but before the actual interview started, some wanted to reaffirm that their names or company names would not be used.

Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed separately before conducting a cross-interview analysis (Patton, 2002). The data were coded and organized into topics based on the literature review and Kram's (1985) work on mentoring behaviors to create a framework for describing what was collected. Two dimensions of mentoring support emerged from Kram's work on mentoring, and these have been the basis for most mentoring research: (a) psychosocial benefits, which refer to aspects of mentoring that enhance a sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in a professional role. These aspects may include role modeling, counseling, friendship, acceptance, and confirmation; and (b) career-related aspects that enhance career enhancement. These benefits may involve coaching, protection, sponsorship, or challenging assignments. Direct quotes are used throughout the report to reflect participant thoughts and perceptions about their mentoring experiences.

Findings

The study found that participants had a preference for informal mentoring relationships and that their mentors were mostly Caucasian women. The participants observed that there were certain differences between women and men mentors, but did not offer up preferences for either gender. They felt that women were good mentors, but that they may not have the same level of influence as men. The women in the study believed that women were easier to talk to, attempted to have more discussions, and tried to find out more about the mentee. They felt that men tended to be more business focused and straight forward in their approach to mentoring.

Overall, study participants believed that mentoring has had a positive impact on their career development and found that mentors provided support in the form of counseling and advice, protection, sponsorship, and friendship.

The women involved in the study defined mentoring in terms that correspond to Kram's career and psychosocial benefits of mentoring. Study participants defined mentoring as assisting/helping, guidance, coaching, advice, counseling, sharing ideas, obtaining feedback, and supporting.

Achievement and career success are typical of what a mentoring relationship can provide with exposure, protection, guidance, and coaching (Kram, 1985). Analysis of the text revealed that study participants were looking for psychosocial functions (role modeling, counseling, and friendship) in the mentoring relationships, but that they also placed additional emphasis on career benefits such as advice and guidance from their mentors more frequently.

Preference for Informal Mentoring Relationships

One of the themes emerging from the women's experiences with formal and informal mentoring was a preference for informal mentoring relationships. The study found that the informal mentoring relationships, as experienced by these women, tended to fulfill many of the career and psychosocial functions of mentoring as identified by Kram (1985). In these informal relationships as mentees, study participants experienced career functions such as sponsorship, coaching, and visibility. They also experienced the psychosocial functions such as friendship, encouragement, counseling, listening, and role modeling. Hopkins and Grigoris (2005) concluded that mentees believe informal mentoring relationships best support their development, and this study's results seem to support that conclusion.

Formal programs, which can provide a more structured focus on mentoring, while beneficial, were viewed as time consuming, process driven, and in some cases, less effective than informal mentoring. Study participants also viewed formal mentoring programs as too dependent on the mentor's availability, which tends to be limited since most of the mentors are senior executives.

All of the study participants cited time as the enemy of both formal and informal mentoring relationships, but especially formal relationships surrounded by processes and constraints felt by both mentees and mentors.

My organization has a formal program, but I have never filled out the forms. For some reason I think if you go ahead and look at the list of people, identify a mentor, fill out the forms and discuss how often we should meet and blah, blah, blah. It is too much like a task. I am sure the relationship will become like 'let's just talk about 10 minutes' and that

is it. I think choosing a mentor naturally... makes it easier, less of a project or task. (Participant 3)

When you make things too formal...it is hard. Sometimes if you make things a little less formal it makes things easier. If you brand someone as a formal mentor it is more responsibility for that person. Informal mentoring is more frequent than the formal one where you have to fill out forms, identify a potential mentor, contact them, and on a scheduled basis talk to them. That is a bit more rigid. I do actually have two or three people I would call mentors and there is nothing formal about it. (Participant 2)

I have been a mentee in both types of mentoring (informal and formal) and I think the informal type was more to my style. (Participant 1)

I have not worked in a single company that had a formal mentoring program. I have worked in very large organizations with a lot of discussion about mentoring, but none had a formal program. My experiences have been largely informal. (Participant 6)

My (formal) mentoring experience was a little bit tough because the senior executives' schedules are limited and it was hard for me to reach them at times. We had the initial meeting and then some meetings afterward, but by the end of my first program, my mentor left the organization and they were not able to find another person for me. Another time, I had a mentor but it was hard for me to reach out to them. I reached out in many different ways, but they did not really like to reach out to me. (Participant 7)

There is a formal process and you can sign up for a mentor. There are no guidelines and it is up to the mentee to keep the relationship going. I signed up for it, but there were not a lot of people (mentors) doing it. You have to personally select people and latch on to them. I have a mentor that I personally selected about 3 or 4 years ago. (Participant 5)

Who are the Mentors?

Bahniuk and Hill (1998) indicated that “regardless of the race or gender of the mentee, white males are the most frequent mentors in organizations” (p. 4). They suggested that in many organizations, same-race mentoring predominates due to complications and taboos and while, “white mentees virtually have no mentors outside of their race, black mentees form the majority of their developmental relationships with whites” (Bahniuk & Hill, p. 4). The present study seems to support some of Bahniuk and Hill’s premises, but not all. While the interviews revealed predominance of Caucasian mentors, study participants also have had African American mentors. The women indicated that their mentors were usually senior executives like vice presidents whether inside or outside of their organizations.

My mentor is a vice president. I think she has been here 15 years and she was the first or second woman manager. I actually sought out an African American female who was a vice president, but she was leaving the company and recommended the woman who is my current mentor. Even though she is not African American, the same things that are

going on in my head are going on in hers. This actually helped me because I learned to go out of my comfort zone. (Participant 5)

The person who mentored me was the head of the organization. He is Caucasian.” (Participant 6)

My mentors are all executives in senior positions who have been with the company between 17 and 25 years. My mentors are two males and one female. One male mentor is African American, but the other two are Caucasian. (Participant 3)

I have had one male and one female mentor and they were both white. (Participant 1)

Four of my mentors were women and one was a male. They are Caucasians. There are no Asian senior executives in my location. (Participant 7)

God is my mentor. Maybe it was not a wise thing that I did not have a ‘flesh and bone’ mentor. I wish I did. I need someone who I can learn from to be my mentor. My standards for a mentor may have been too high. I just talk to God a lot. Things were not always easy for me. If I had a person as a mentor, there might have been situations where someone could have spoken on my behalf. (Participant 4)

Does Race Matter?

Not having a same race mentor did not seem to matter to most of the participants in the study. It seemed that the senior leadership in the participants’ organizations was comprised of largely Caucasian men, with an occasional woman. While bothersome to some, this was accepted as reality and did not seem to have an impact on the women’s desire to progress in their careers or commitment to their organizations.

I think race does matter...it matters a bit more than gender. I have observed that the African American affinity group here is very tight. I noticed that there is a very strong mentoring environment. If you have a problem you can talk to someone. I do not know that there is something similar for Caucasians. (Participant 3)

There are only three of ‘us’ in the whole company of 7,000 employees: African American women in management and I am a supervisor. (Participant 5)

There are no Asians at the senior executive level in my location. It is very hard to find Asian leaders here. The Chinese people can run a country, but they cannot be leaders here. That does not make sense. (Participant 7)

When we walk into a room, the first thing we do is look around and make a quick assessment of who is there to see if anybody else looks like us. If we do not see anybody, we have to figure out where we fit in and if we are being heard or taken seriously. I do not think white people do that. They just walk in and it is a room. (Participant 1)

Are There Differences Between Men and Women Mentors?

The opinions of the study participants indicated that there is a difference between male and female mentors, but they showed no strong indication of preference for either gender. However, the study participants did relate their experiences with both to point out perceived differences.

Sometimes people will say that mentoring is harder with women or even some women have issues with women in power...especially African American women. I wonder how do you get past that because as times change and we take on these positions, there will be more women of color in powerful positions and how do you work with them and not against them? There are a lot of influential African American women. It could be that we have not been in leadership positions as long and our positions seem tentative. (Participant 1)

I feel that women are a little bit easier to talk to sometimes. Males are more like A-B-C-D. A woman may take a more personal approach to mentoring. I think that women are just as influential as men, but in a different way. I think men may be more willing to mentor than women because I think women have a certain sense of insecurity unless they are extremely secure in their positions. Men characteristically have more secure positions. (Participant 2)

Initially I thought women would be the best mentors, but I cannot differentiate. I do think that women can be influential mentors, but you can learn a lot from male mentors because you operate in their environment. They know the ins and outs better than anyone else, so you can leverage that. (Participant 3)

I think that women are probably the best mentors. However, I have observed that most women, as good as they would like to be, may not be empowered to do what they need to do for their mentees. (Participant 4)

It is kind of hard to say. I think women are good mentors in general because you need the caring aspect. I am an emotional person, but I do not want a mentor who is too emotional. We can be good mentors... it just depends on the person you are talking to. I think women can be influential based on the opportunities they have been given and what they do with the opportunities. (Participant 5)

There are definitely some differences. Women attempt to discuss more... I would tend to say they are more apt to find out more about you and share their experiences and struggles of being a woman. My male mentor tends to be straight to the point... no dancing around. Men give you the overall picture. We have had great discussions, but he is more business related. It is not that women are not business oriented, but they like to take time to know you better. Both have their good points. (Participant 7)

Support from Mentors

What type of support do minority women leaders receive through formal or informal mentoring relationships? The women in the study found that having a mentor who was not their manager provided more openness and the ability to discuss topics and have conversations that might not be feasible with a manager. As one participant pointed out, “There are some ideas that you cannot share with your current manager or your department and that do not really give you too much growth in other sections” (Participant 7).

The participants also found value in the advice and support that their mentors provided on introductions, office politics, cultural, and gender issues. The support that study participants received from their mentors included teaching and advising, along with introductions to people and organizations which served to boost mentee visibility and put them in positions where they were noticed. Gouillart and Kelly (1995) maintained that of all the forms of personal development, none is more effective than learning on the job under the guidance of a mentor, “therefore assigning high caliber individuals to mentor-guided life-forming projects remains the most effective way of accelerating individual development” (p. 430).

Counseling/Advice

Regarding receiving counseling or advice from mentors, this is what the participants had to say:

The first time I used my mentor was when I got my first manager’s survey (a multi-rater assessment). I was so upset because I got some negative feedback. I thought I was supposed to get 100%, but she explained to me that I should not take these kinds of things personally and that I still had a good survey. I used to take things very personally. (Participant 5)

I learned good mentoring skills from a mentor early in my career. He and I sat down at lunch and he said, ‘here’s what I will do for you if this is what you want’. He laid out a mentoring program for me and I said I want it. (Participant 6)

My supervisor is very helpful. I can always count on her to push me up to the next level. She will always find time for me if I need help. If I go to her, I look for guidance and suggestions. You cannot go talk to your mentor with no ideas. Basically, you go to talk to bounce ideas to see if there is some improvement or certain solutions. (Participant 2)

An African American mentor coaches me on how to navigate through corporate America. My parents are from Senegal and I grew up in France, so I knew very little about American culture. Through my other mentor, I have learned to be more collaborative and more patient and to try to integrate different points of view, even the ones that initially do not seem rational to me. He is quite blunt and will come out and tell me after meetings that this is how I should address specific groups and these are the considerations I have to take into account. I hope I have improved (he told me that I have), but he cannot advise me on cultural issues because he is Caucasian and we do not see eye-to-eye on certain things. (Participant 3)

I believe that your mentor is someone from whom you would seek guidance and I need someone to tell me or guide me in a direction. I just talk to God a lot. I feel like the world of information technology can be a wilderness and you are navigating through a lot of things and you really do not know what the outcome is going to be. I have learned to totally depend on God. (Participant 4)

Protection

An African American participant in the study, who was a former corporate vice president, reflected on an experience when her mentor interceded on her behalf when she was being excluded:

Basically the person (a Caucasian male) did not acknowledge me, although we had to work together. He did not return phone calls and was generally uncooperative. My mentor went to him and demanded that he apologize to me and strongly suggested that he started cooperating. Then I was able to get my work done. (Participant 6)

Visibility/Sponsorship

When asked regarding visibility and sponsorship from mentors, the participants' comments were as follows:

My mentor took me with him to meetings when we had to design and develop new things. He even developed tests for me to take before he would let me go into the room with senior management. I practiced and prepared to take the tests. My mentor arranged for me to meet all of the division presidents and tour the field where I learned the business so I could talk the business with white males. That gave me an edge. (Participant 6)

My mentor suggested things I should do or organizations to become involved with. I received a lot of support with introductions to people and key organizations and I was able to show my stuff in front of other people that maybe in the course of my regular job I would not have been exposed to. I was able to get a bigger picture and bigger assignments. This was very helpful to my career. I went on to become president of a mentoring organization. I wished I had the same opportunity in my other positions. (Participant 1)

I got sponsored by a couple of people, which is very nice because you usually get one and if you have two or three who submit your name, it is a big plus. (Participant 3)

My mentor wrote a letter of recommendation when I applied for another position. I did not get the job though. When we first started she said she was more than willing to get me into meetings and help me meet people and she has done that. I am still learning that even though you shake hands and go to lunch it does not fully open doors for you. It helps push them open, but you have to do some work yourself. (Participant 5)

Right now I am working on an Asian leadership conference where I work with other companies. Our president and chairman are going to attend along with other Fortune 100 companies. I was recommended by someone who is not my mentor, but who wanted to give me a chance to do this. (Participant 7)

Friendship

Reflecting on the role of friendship in the mentoring relationship, these were the participants' comments:

My mentor and I would do periodic calls and if we happened to be in the same city, we would meet for lunch or dinner. Although this was a formal program, he was very instrumental in my career development and this resulted in a lot of good things for me and the organization. Our relationship bonded him to the organization and us to each other. He was good at guiding and giving me counsel. I will send him an e-mail occasionally. (Participant 1)

In one company, the black senior vice president did not really have time to mentor me, but she garnered a lot of respect for my abilities and she became a kind of mentor by giving me advice. We continued the relationship when she left the company and she and I are friends to this day. (Participant 6)

Mentees Becoming Mentors

Do minority women who have been mentored mentor others? Maxwell (2005; as cited by Brown, 2005) emphasized the importance of leaders developing other potential leaders through mentorship by arguing that there is no success without a successor. Vincent and Seymour (1995) conducted a study to compare the demographics of mentors and non-mentors and developed a profile of a typical mentor. Their research showed that senior corporate women have proven surprisingly reluctant to take on mentoring roles. With the exception of one participant, the women who participated in the study said that they have mentored or are mentoring others both formally and informally.

In informal mentoring, researchers have found that mentors or mentees may choose each other because of similar goals and interests. Some study participants indicated that they had chosen mentors or that they had been chosen as mentors based on similarities such as graduating from the same school, similar industry, professional associations, and race. Most of the relationships were informal and study participants claimed that they had also been approached by others of differing race and gender who sought advice and counsel.

One study participant hesitated to be considered a formal mentor because she said that "I would really want to be a good mentor and I would if asked, but I really do not want to unless I know I have the time and energy to do it. If I sign up to do it, I would really try to do my best" (Participant 2).

Discussion

Mentoring has been heralded as essential to business success and as an invaluable resource to help women overcome obstacles in the workplace. Over the last few decades, mentoring relationships became especially important for women and minorities who have been traditionally denied contacts enjoyed by Caucasian men (Gibson, Tesone, & Buchalski, 2000). With the exception of one individual, the mentoring experiences of the women interviewed for this study converge in several ways. Their mentors were senior executives; they generally preferred informal mentoring relationships; and all have had one or more Caucasian mentor. The research found no difference in preferences with respect to age or ethnicity or a preference for mentors based on race or gender. Although both Chinese participants indicated additional cultural barriers that gave false impressions of their abilities, they adapted quickly to their environments through observations. The African women were dynamically different. While they were from different countries originally, I expected to discover some commonalities in their mentoring experiences, but since one claimed God as her mentor, it was difficult to synchronize their experiences.

The career and psychosocial functions of the mentoring experience were consistent across age and ethnic background, although an analysis of one participant's interview revealed a higher incidence of career functions than others. The participant who had not been mentored as defined in this research understood the value of mentoring and noted some mentoring needs in line with Kram's (1985) research that would have been helpful to her.

Conclusion

Minority women leaders may not suffer from the lack of mentoring, but it is obvious that there is a dearth of same-race role models with whom they can identify. What is also relevant to the research of the career success of women of color is the organizational culture into which their success is embedded, often identified by relationship factors such as the presence of mentors and role models as being vital (Roan & Rooney, 2006). Absence of access to such resources has been identified as inhibiting women's career development (Adler et al., 1993; Burke & McKeen, 1990; Smeltzer & Fann, 1989; Travers & Pemberton, 1997).

The women agreed that it was not easy for them in corporate America and overall, they believed that mentoring was useful. Among the things they would have liked to see in the mentoring of minority women, was the ability to provide actionable feedback and not just have a program for meeting and gathering to keep them quiet. They also believed that the process and structure of formal mentoring programs needed to change to something more proactive that would foster continual activity with a quasi-structured program. This study shows that minority women leaders are engaged in informal and/or formal mentoring relationships as mentees, so this defies the research that proposes that minority women as a whole suffer from lack of mentoring. Could there be other reasons for the absence of minority women leaders in the top tier? Minority women leaders have been persistent in their career growth although there are few role models in senior level positions. "I know minority women who have made it to top level roles, but it is tough and they have suffered. These women have said the same thing I am saying and that is you cannot fold under the pressure" (Participant 6).

According to study participants, minority women have to become more focused and open in their interactions with other minority women for alignment and support for their mutual development.

I think minority women do not see other minority women as a means to get them to where they need to go, so they do not align themselves with them. I am not saying it is good or bad, it is survival. (Participant 6)

As mentors we can do much better. You tend to gravitate to people who are similar to yourself and it is good in that way, but sometimes you can learn things from other people who are different from you. (Participant 7)

Sometimes women have issues with women that have power, especially women of color in their same race. (Participant 1)

I think to be a good mentor you have to be well-rounded. I have met some women who make a lot of money and they were very narrow-minded. Sometimes I do not think people like to (mentor) since they did not come from the same background as you. (Participant 5)

Implications for Organizations

Minority women leaders may thrive better in informal mentoring relationships rather than through formal ones. While the careers of the women in the study may have benefited from formal mentoring programs, these programs may not provide access to mentors that they would naturally select. “Willing mentors may not know about the program or be afraid to commit to a formal program,” one participant commented.

Senior executives may seem like ideal mentors, but it is no secret that the very nature of their jobs may limit the time they are able to spend in effective mentoring relationships. There may also not be enough willing and available senior executive mentors to go around. In formal programs, organizations should look beyond senior executives for mentors. Affinity groups seem to provide options for informal mentoring opportunities. Organizations can take advantage of the social networking that takes place in these groups to recruit potential mentors and promote the concept of mentoring.

The race and gender of their mentors are not “deal breakers” for the women who participated in the study and neither do they hesitate to mentor others of different gender and races on an informal or formal basis. This “trickle-down” effect can help individual development, support diversity strategies, help retain talent, and subsequently support organizational development.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the absence of a greater variety of racially diverse women. Hispanic and Native American women are not represented and the Asian women are both Chinese. This may limit the ability to generalize the study across race. The study could be stronger with more racial representation.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research is needed to compare the experiences of minority women leaders to Caucasian women leaders in order to assess differences and similarities. It is also recommended that mentoring experiences of minority women at entry and mid-levels be explored. Further research is also needed to identify the practices of mentors that contribute to fulfilling the career and psychosocial needs of mentees and in particular minority women leaders. Additional research is also needed to compare the prevalent mentoring practices in informal and formal relationships and the impact on individual, career, and organizational development.

About the Author

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Semi-structured interview questions were drawn from the literature and categorized by behavior and experience, opinions, feelings, what the participants have seen or heard, participant knowledge, and individual demographics.

- What is mentoring?
- Do you think your organization encourages mentoring?
- Are you aware of any formal mentoring programs in your organization?
- Do you currently or have you participated in a formal mentoring program?
- Were you a mentor or mentee?
- How did you become part of the program?
- What are the eligibility requirements for formal mentoring at your company?
- How did you find out about the program?
- Why did you decide to participate?
- Have you had a mentor outside of a formal mentoring program?
- What was your mentor's job/position?
- Describe the mentoring relationship?
- What was good about your mentoring experience?
- What would you have liked to change?
- What type of support did you receive from your mentor?
- What was the impact of mentoring on your career development?
- How did you feel about the impact of mentoring on your career?
- How have your mentors supported your development and/or career movement?
- What type of projects did you work on that can be attributed to sponsorship or exposure from your mentor?
- What do you think about women as mentors?
- Do you think women mentors are viewed as influential as men?
- Tell me what I would see if I looked at senior management at your company
- Social networking: If I were a fly on the wall at your organization, what social experiences would I observe you having in a typical week?
- What would you like to see happen with mentoring for women at your company?

Appendix B

Participant Profiles

1. African American participant, age 54. She is a former vice president in the marketing information industry. She held that position for a year and a half. Prior to that, she was a vice president in the cable industry for 20 year. She recently became an entrepreneur.
2. Chinese American participant, age 45. She is a corporate credit manager in the financial industry. She has been with her current company for more than 11 years, but in her current position for one year.
3. African participant originally from Senegal, but grew up in France, age late 30s. She is a senior manager in the financial industry. She has been with her current company for two and a half years. She has a background in construction and civil engineering.
4. African participant originally from Nigeria, age 51. She is a director of technology, training and staff development in the education industry. She has been in her current job approximately one year. She was also an information technology director in her previous position, where she had been employed for 14 years. She does not have a mentor.
5. African American participant, age 31. She is a sales supervisor in the technology industry and has been in her current position for five years. She has been with the company for eight and a half years.
6. African American participants, age 58. She worked as a senior vice president in the financial industry and was in this position for 3 years. She has been a practitioner for 36 years.
7. Chinese American participant, age 39. She is an assistant vice president in the financial industry and has been with the company close to 10 years. She has been in her current position less than one year.

Appendix C

Informed Consent Protocol

An informed consent protocol was developed to inform participants of the purpose of collecting information and how it would be used. Participants were provided with an e-mail prior to the interview and told at the start of the conversation what the interview would entail and how responses would be handled (Patton 2002).

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study about the formal and informal mentoring experiences of women of color leaders in U.S. workplaces. If you decide to participate, between June 23 and July 28 you will be interviewed by phone or in person in a process that should take approximately 30-45 minutes.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. The data will be analyzed and reported primarily as an educational assignment for a grade, but already this topic is gathering interest from business professionals. No names or company affiliations will be identified in the report, and certain demographics may be collected during the interview such as age, race, and occupation. Those demographics will appear in the report.

This research is important because while there is abundant research that validates the virtues of mentoring as an attribute of effective leadership, there is little that specifically focuses upon the formal and informal mentoring experiences of women of color in leadership positions in the U.S. Not only will this study add to the body of knowledge on women of color and mentoring in the business environment but it can be helpful to organizations that are committed to building the presence and increasing retention of women of color in leadership positions.