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Pushing Back Against Deficit Narratives: Mentoring as Scholars of Color

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Demographic data show that few scholars of color reach graduate school, and that fewer attain a faculty position and go on to obtain tenure (Myers, 2016; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014). In 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 14% of graduate students identified as Black, 10% as Hispanic, 7% as Asian American, 3% identified with two or more races, and less than 1% as Native American (de Brey et al., 2019). NCES also reported that 6% of associate professors identified as Black, 5% identified as Hispanic, 12% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and less than 1% identify as Native American. For full professors, percentages drop by at least 1 percentage point for each group. Because the percentages of Indigenous and mixed-race faculty are so small, already at less than 1%, it is difficult to ascertain if their numbers increase or decline (NCES Fast Facts, 2018, p. 222). We share this information because faculty at the rank of associate and full professor are more likely to mentor and feel socially and academically responsible for students (Motha & Varghese, 2018). In their study, Patton and Harper (2003) shared that African American women respondents "felt that having an African American female mentor would be a rich and unique experience" because of the mentor's "firsthand life and academic experiences" (p. 71). We agree that protégés are looking for mentors who look like them. When there are fewer potential mentors who understand cultural and gendered nuances available, then graduate students and new faculty of color have to depend on who is available while also likely over-taxing faculty of color who are available. The term cultural taxation, coined by Padilla (1994), describes the unique burden placed on the few ethnic minoritized faculty on predominantly white campuses who provide -- in addition to institutional needs for diverse representation -- mentorship for students of color, whether or not they are their advisees or enrolled in the same department. Padilla (1994) notes that these faculty may not be rewarded for such service, and may become "overcommitted and at risk for burnout" (p.26).

The purpose of this article is to discuss our experiences mentoring— as a full professor and an associate professor who are women of color— in the academy that is fraught with deficit narratives about communities of color, people of color, and people who identify beyond the binary genders. For example, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) state that "according to cultural deficit storytelling, a successful student of color is an assimilated student of color...and they identify the terms 'at-risk' and... 'disadvantaged'... [as part of the] cultural deficit terminology..." (p. 31). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) also challenge the dominant narrative that educational institutions are objective, based on meritocracy, and race neutral. With the current rise in hate crimes (Xu, 2019), which are defined as "crimes that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, gender or gender identity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity" (Hate Crime Statistics, 2010, p. 1), we feel a heightened urgency to counter these narratives (Turner, 2015a; Turner & González, 2014a; Turner, 2003). We push back against the assumption that institutions of higher education are neutral sites, that we have to change to belong, and that we do not belong. We argue that the repudiation of deficit narratives and the lifting up of the narratives of those we mentor, the narratives of those who mentor us, and our own narratives, as vital to increasing faculty of color in higher education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

What is Mentoring?

There are many definitions of mentoring. Merriam-Webster defines a mentor as a "tutor" or "coach." Mentoring involves a relationship in which the mentor shares knowledge, provides support, and serves as a role model (Jacobi, 1991). Mentoring as a way to form business and social networks is common (Kanter, 1977). It can introduce individuals to careers (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012) and peer mentoring type programs can support postsecondary students (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007). Some mentoring relationships are formal in nature through institutional or organizational programs, while others are informal. The image of traditional mentoring is that of the elder scholar taking a younger scholar under their wing to impart knowledge and sage advice. In contrast, for women and scholars of color, alternate models of co-mentoring and group mentoring provide space to process the patriarchy and individualism of higher education (Turner, 2015b; Turner & González, 2014a; Turner & González, 2014b). "Mentoring provides a process that can buffer women from both overt and covert forms of discrimination and assist women faculty to advance in academia and break through the ceiling" (Agosto et al., 2016, p. 77). Other forms include gendered and cross-cultural mentoring (Girves, Zepeda, & Gwathmey, 2005). What is important is that all differences be recognized (Bowman, Kite, Branscombe & Stacey, 1999). Patton and Harper (2003) found that African American women felt this was important:

> The women stated that only an African American woman could understand the complex intersection of race and gender in the academy and society. They felt they could establish a deeper, more meaningful connection with her because of her firsthand life and academic experiences. Also, she could provide advice to help them avoid professional pitfalls while being a sister and a friend. (p. 71)

As discussed previously, there are many factors involved in mentoring, including trust, networking, skill development, encouragement, and recognition. When possible, as noted above, same-race and same-gender mentoring relationships can be very significant. However, successful mentoring experiences can also take place across-race and across-gender (Turner & González, 2014a). What is important is caring and listening to students and new faculty.

We will discuss several articles regarding mentoring among women of color before we begin sharing our stories. Findings from these studies inform and guide our own mentoring processes. The publications referred to in this article have a similar theme of relational kinship in addition to professional guidance. As noted above, African American women felt that mentoring relationships with other African American women would be "deeper" and "more meaningful" (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 71). These relationships were described as mother/daughter relationships, and some participants referred to their mentor as a "second mother" (p. 71).

> In addition to emotional support, the mothering role in mentoring proved to be effective in helping the participants learn survival skills such as how to maintain professionalism, dress properly, successfully navigate political environments, and reject negative stereotypes that have been traditionally used to characterize African American women. (p. 71)

Their lived experiences informed the need for mentoring to resist a system that is not made for people of color, let alone women of color. In a similar vein, Bernstein, Jacobson, and Russo (2010) deduced that, "the goal of mentoring is not simply to teach the system, but also to change the system so that it becomes more flexible and responsive to the needs and pathways of its members—

mentors and protégés" (p. 58). Furthermore, in *Mentoring as Transformative Practice: Supporting Student and Faculty Diversity* (Turner, 2015b), article contributors underscore the importance of the development of bidirectional trust relationships, practices based on social justice and equity, the creation of affirming learning environments, and the facilitation of a deeper sense of belonging and legitimacy as foundational to mentorships which nurture the academic growth of diverse student and faculty talent.

Indigenous ways of knowing and relationality (Wilson, 2008) form the foundation for sisterhood practices described in Shotton, Tachine, Nelson, Minthorn, and Waterman's (2018) description of a collective of Indigenous women scholars in higher education. While the article's focus is on research, the sisterhood practices of love, validation, and care— of each other and to our families, communities and land—is based on "being a good relative," which is a foundational Indigenous way of being (p.639). The sisterhood supports and validates Indigenous ways of being that are often counter to the ways of the dominant Western institutions in which we work. "Sisterhood," "relative"—these terms come with responsibility, and they are taken seriously. Instead of accepting the isolation, competitiveness, and solo-authored privilege of higher education, the collective collaborates while also having a presence that pushes back against the asterisk – marking the erasure of Native American data in quantitative studies due to sampling requirements and small populations (Shotton, Lowe & Waterman, 2013) and other stereotypes.

In their reflective article, Motha and Varghese (2018) "draw from two theoretical lenses: 1) from critical theory using the concepts of counter-story (Solarzano &Yosso, 2002) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and 2) from poststructuralism within the context of teaching based on Alsup's (2006) borderland discourses" (p. 507) to describe a mentoring network that develops alternative ways of being women faculty of color and supports their identities rather than assimilating "into the ill-fitting mold" of the academy (p. 504). The authors pushed back against advice to work on "efficient" (p. 510) research projects that would produce publications rather than research that benefits communities. They write that their "article is an example of a counter-story, refuting established representations of academic life, highlighting the people and factors that help to shape our context into one that opens up possibilities and draws on our strengths, and narrating the ways in which we work to identify alternatives to assimilation" (p. 507).

Agosto and colleagues (2016) describe a multiethnic, multilingual, and multi-geographic mentoring network of women in academia that emerged through their attendance at professional organization annual meetings and continued through "techno-social forms of communication" (p. 6). They recommend that "mentoring groups create opportunities to learn about each member's cultural norms and identities, as well as the organizational culture in which their cultural norms and identities are mediated" (p. 13). The above studies demonstrate several nuanced elements which constitute effective mentoring across cultural differences.

Conceptual Framework

Embracing approaches of effective mentoring across differences as noted in the studies above, we simultaneously reject external definitions of our identities (Simpson, 2017) and deficit assumptions of the knowledge and talents of communities of color (Yosso, 2005). These perspectives fuel our mentoring philosophies. In addition, Patel's (2016) insights are applicable here as she discusses her refusal to define research as "objectively rendered, neutral, and person-less" (p. 85). We are also inspired by researchers who support the use of the narrative as legitimate scholarship and who

encourage its use as an important source of knowledge of the human experience (Clark, 2008; Harper, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nash, 2004; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). We recognize and encourage community and cultural strengths that support ourselves in higher education.

Learning by Living

As women scholars of color pushing back against a structure that encourages competitive individualism and institutions built on settler colonialism intent on erasing and holding power over people of color, we share some of our stories learned from years of experience navigating such higher education environments. Learning by living informs how we mentor, and our co-mentoring (Nganga & Beck, 2017). By working in historically White institutions, often without like-us-colleagues, often without local or national role models, we constructed "epistemological privilege" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1994, p. 553); we had to learn "the inner workings of privilege and exclusion, and [to] identify ways to challenge and expose forms of inequity" (p. 553). The academy encourages objective, independent, individual, isolated publications and research (Tatum, 1997; Contreras, 2005; Yosso, 2005). We know that to be our true selves, we could not engage in that way of being. Using *our* experiences in settler colonial environments to inform our mentoring, we shared, we invited in, we reached out, and we embraced collaboration and affirmation. We share our stories next.

Caroline S. Turner, Latina and Filipina ciswoman, full professor, former administrator

My educational journey has taken me from working as a farm laborer to becoming the first in my family to go to college, to having the opportunity to serve for over 30 years as a professor of education at three large universities. Over the years, in addition to being a professor, I had the opportunity to serve in several administrative and leadership capacities. These include experiences as a founding director of a doctoral program and a state educational policy fellowship program, as a college of education interim dean and associate dean of research, and as president of an international higher education organization. In most of these contexts, I was a first (Latina, Filipina, woman of color, etc.) to serve. My combined experience with research and practice has provided opportunities for me to influence processes toward the increase of faculty of color and the creation of inclusive mentoring programs that support their career advancement and development.

In 1963, I was admitted to college, awarded a scholarship, and began my life as an undergraduate. At that time there were no financial aid programs, and I could count the number of students of color on campus on one hand. As my family dropped me off, a dorm mother approached me and said that they did not know where to assign me as I was different [as a Mexican/Filipina farm laborer] from most of the students on campus. I was finally assigned to room with another person who was also thought of as different. Later in the day, one of my first responses to fellow freshmen at the dorm stemmed from a statement made by another entering freshman to a group of her friends. She said, "Poor people are poor because they are lazy," to which I responded that my family is poor but my father works from sun up to sun down. "We are poor, but we are not lazy." Everyone looked at me and just walked away. My entire first day experience made me feel strange.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I inquired about master's degree programs. As a woman of color from a "no collar" farm laborer class, when first exploring graduate school options I was discouraged from applying to a master's level program in business by an admissions officer. The admissions officer stated that I would not be a good fit. I was a woman, a minority, a single parent, I

had experience in the public sector, and I had some but not enough math background. This would make it nearly impossible for me to succeed as others in the program fit an opposite profile. Although all of this may be true, it did not occur to the admissions officer that having a homogeneous and privileged student body might not be an appropriate state of affairs for student enrollment in the program. It was merely accepted as the way things are and should remain. I remember being struck by the many ways I could be defined as not "fitting in" and, therefore, not encouraged and, more than likely, not admitted. Program norms made it so I was easily "defined out" rather than "defined in" (Turner, 2003, p. 112). In my view, this is a personal example of how multiple social identities shape one's opportunities in higher education.

Over the last decades, teaching, conducting research, and otherwise interacting with a multitude of students and faculty of color leads me to conclude that to succeed in academe places enormous pressure on people of color to assimilate. In other words, we are encouraged to leave ourselves, who we are, and our community knowledge at the door as we enter educational institutions and, as faculty, while undergoing the tenure and promotion processes. However, who you are shapes the types of questions you ask, the kinds of issues that interest you, and the ways in which you go about seeking solutions. While doctoral student and faculty socialization processes are very strong, we must not lose ourselves in the process of fitting in. During an early period of my career, I wrote two research publications, based on interviews with students and faculty of color, which best portray these dominant and alienating processes: *A Guest in Someone Else's House: Students of Color on Campus* (1994) and *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success* (with Myers, Jr., 2000). These titles indicate the essence of study findings which underscore that even though a student or a faculty member may be intelligent, resilient, and motivated, such characteristics alone may not be enough to counter the effects of unwelcoming and often toxic learning environments. In such environments, institutional responsiveness and mentoring are crucial in order to persist and thrive.

In my support and mentoring of students and junior faculty, I stress that we must not only maintain our own identities but help others to do so as well, underscoring that one's intellectual development from childhood on is of great value and must be wholly drawn upon when addressing life challenges. It is important to remember where we come from and how one's background affects approaches to both our scholarly work and our administrative practice. Gaining a deeper understanding of the value of all knowledge, including knowledge learned during childhood both at home and within one's community, is critical to our personal and professional growth (Turner, 2017; Turner, 2015a: Turner, 2003).

Persistent and intentional work must be done to address the underrepresentation of students and faculty of color in academia. We must continue to reduce isolation and boost our interactions with one another in multiple ways, face to face and/or through social media. We must present papers/workshops together, write together, and cite one another's work. In addition, as full professors, we are typically asked to serve on the university-wide promotion and tenure committee, a very important campus service which provides opportunities to promote the understanding of the valuable contributions made by what is considered non-traditional scholarship. Through observation, we can also learn more about promotion and tenure processes to inform those on a pathway to promotion and tenure. At the same time, we can work to change perspectives of what is valued in the academy, promoting needed change in such processes. Furthermore, as administrators, including college presidents (Turner, 2007), one can create inclusive mentoring spaces and fund programs that are supportive of student success and the hiring and development of a diverse faculty. Campus leaders may also be in positions from which they can negotiate for diverse faculty and administrators during the

hiring and promotion process. Each of us, in our own way, must and can use our spheres of influence to advocate for and create needed change toward increasing opportunities, as well as fostering welcoming learning environments for ourselves and others.

However, I want to conclude with a word of caution. Reading about successes in academia, individual discussions with others and presentations to audiences reveal that mentoring can be defined from a deficit perspective which is important to acknowledge and guard against. Scholars who are viewed as talented by traditional higher education norms have always been mentored/sponsored (Clark, 2008; Zuckerman, 1996). Minoritized scholars of color also benefit from mentoring as a critical means to navigate the academic landscape, not due to their perceived deficits as students/faculty of color, but, in my view, by including them within already existing mentoring processes. This cross-cultural mentoring space and publications addressing it (such as those referred to in this article) have contributed to the growth, however small, of faculty and administrators of color and their allies.

Stephanie J. Waterman, Indigenous ciswoman, tenured associate professor

When I was inquiring about graduate programs, I met with a non-Native faculty member in her office to discuss programs and application requirements. I had not yet applied to any doctoral program. After a short discussion I was told, "Well, maybe you're not capable of writing a dissertation." This faculty member had not read any of my work, seen a transcript, or spoken with my colleagues. That following Fall I was admitted to a doctoral program. I graduated from that program on time by, indeed, writing a dissertation, and I was awarded a national prestigious postdoctoral fellowship, obtained a tenure track position, and earned tenure. My experience as an Indigenous student in non-Native University settings without Indigenous classmates or faculty informs how I support all students and mentor others as a faculty member. As a first-generation doctoral student, in a program where one of my faculty wondered if I could complete a dissertation, I found it hard to ask questions and show any behavior that might appear to be a weakness. I mentored before I was tenured despite knowing the implications of taking time away from single-authored work. I did so, and continue to, because I did not receive the guidance I needed.

Settler colonial constructs are privileged in the academy, which often runs in direct conflict with Indigenous ways of being (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Settler colonial constructs of time, distance/objectivity (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014), individualism/competitiveness, and academic pipelines de-humanize students (Patel, 2016; Waterman, Lowe & Shotton, 2018). The western academy pushes and rushes us. Faculty and administrators are under pressing time constraints that inhibit relationship-building and care. External stereotypes and uncontested master narratives can inhibit student support. As noted in the opening anecdote, the faculty member stated her opinion of my potential ability based only on my physical appearance; she assumed deficit and likely negative stereotypes about Native Americans broadly. Indigenous faculty and students push back against these forces to earn their degrees as do other minoritized students.

When I was in my doctoral program I wondered how scholars developed research relationships with colleagues from institutions in different parts of the country, especially new assistant professors. It was only a few years after I completed my doctorate that I realized these relationships were developed in graduate school with their classmates or through the networking provided by their faculty. In my graduate assistantship, two women faculty from a different department helped me navigate my program. While I was able to present and publish an article through that assistantship, it was not

in my discipline, it was not in the field I sought for a faculty position, nor a journal that spoke to higher education.

I mentor by treating others as people, in a good way, through responsible relationships (Wilson, 2008) and by refusing to maintain the status quo of the academy through individualism and competitive behavior (Sunseri, 2007). Before tenure, I read applications and article drafts. I invited others to write with me. I wrote in a style that everyone could understand (as jargon-free as possible) so that my work would be accessible. I met with younger scholars to discuss studies, research, and how to navigate a difficult instructor, and we co-constructed strategies that we could share with others. It was not about me; it was about the larger community of scholars who are marginalized. Inviting others in and asking them about their programs, research, and families are ways we validate each other; they are ways to build community and strengthen relationships. When Caroline invited me to work with her, I understood that we could do good work together, for the benefit of others, and though we come from different backgrounds and cultures, her invitation was familiar to me culturally and I trusted her. When offering help to more junior scholars, a caution I must be aware of is my age. As an older scholar, (some call me auntie), I have to be careful that an invitation or suggestion is not interpreted as a directive, as many of our cultures teach us to respect our elders and younger people may be uncomfortable questioning elder scholars or refusing their recommendations.

Caroline and I presented this paper at a 2019 American Educational Research Association Conference Roundtable. At our table were scholars of color who presented their research and members of the audience who affirmed our experiences. One said, "You touched my heart" and another said there was no help or guidance, no one advising them to "do A, B, C …." The need for mentorship from and for faculty of color remains.

Conclusion

We live in a complex world that was uncritically considered post-racial after Barak Obama's presidential election. That legacy continues and we are now in a post-truth era (Schuessler, 2016). Deficit narratives and negative stereotypes fuel human service and educational funding cuts in this conservative environment. Faculty and scholars of color report experiencing hostility and marginalization (Croom, 2017; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Turner, González & Wong (Lau), 2011; Stanley, 2006; Turner & Myers, 2000) and are overlooked for faculty positions (Gasman, 2016; Turner, 2003). The hidden curriculum of institutions also limits who can be tapped for leadership. Our "epistemological privilege" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994, p. 635) constructed through our memberships in multiple communities helps us to recognize and privilege protocols of the communities we love and support as well as the policies of the institutions in which we work. Through our experiences we can open up possibilities because we recognize the strengths in others and in communities that have been traditionally viewed as deficits.

This article is a co-mentoring and co-inspirational testament to the trust and respect we have for one another and for each other's lens of knowledge. Sharing our real experiences, our relationship has developed and continues to develop over time. We looked forward to working together as part of informing each other's perspectives based on our academic journeys. With the spirit of bringing each other in, we co-proposed, co-presented, and co-authored this article.

We each began and progressed in our academic careers at a time when there were fewer faculty like us from whom to seek mentorship. In this article, we shared our experiences through narrative and

discussed what we have learned. We continue to grow, appreciating our supportive home and academic communities which never cease to mentor us as we mentor others who we meet along our life's pathways.

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