A DIFFERENT MODEL FOR ACADEMIC MENTORING: HOW RACE, MULTIPLICITY AND HOLISM INTERSECT WITH ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

Women of color in academia are turning to the Internet to discover shared experiences of marginalization, racism, and sexism that lead to practical advice, personal edification, and especially, professional triumph. Connections among women scholars of color through online social media sites involve collapses in traditional boundaries among the personal and professional, the acceptable and taboo, and the private and public. The convergence of separate components of identity into a holistic self that is communicated online has generated a different model for the academic mentoring of women of color. We posit that online social network sites confer mentoring for women of color in academia in significant, understudied, and overlooked ways. For a study involving women of color online, Facebook is an ideal social network. African American and Latinos are more likely to use social networking sites than whites (Pew Research Center, 2012). Women are more likely than men to use Facebook and spend greater time there (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Incorporating Facebook into our study of virtual lives often on the margins of academia provides insight into how computer-mediated social communication has transformed mentorship.

Traditional vs. Black feminist mentoring models

Mentors may be defined as individuals with advanced experience and useful knowledge that are committed to providing upward mobility and psychosocial support to mentees in their careers (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Built upon a long-term relationship between an apprentice and a supervisor, the traditional "guru" model of mentoring is face-to-face, dyadic, and asymmetrical in power. Traditional models which include an electronic interface retain rigid, defined roles in which assistance flows from the mentor to the mentee in the specific context of career development, separate from other life areas (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000; Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003).

Within the academic environment, the traditional model has been challenged by feminist mentoring models. While mentoring has been positively connected to success, lack of access to mentoring is endemic, particularly for underrepresented populations. The "guru" model, criticized as Eurocentric and patriarchal, has been contested by African-American feminists who state that mentoring relationships may be co-beneficial, non-hierarchical, reciprocal, and communal. African-American feminist mentoring no longer asks mentor or mentee to disconnect from the various aspects of their identity to engage in academic mentoring. Instead such models pursue a balance of power among parties involved, incorporate emotion, and value both paid and unpaid work (McGuire & Reger, 2003). In our study, we analyze how online social network sites afford the holism and parity inherent in feminist mentoring (Packard, Walsh, & Seidenberg, 2004; Dua, 2007).

Reframing context collapse within digital mentoring

Past research on context collapse has examined how individuals from different social contexts are collapsed into a single audience from the viewpoint of the social network user. We extend context collapse theory by centering the collapse of boundaries not among audience contexts, but within individual contexts. We focus on the collapse of boundaries separating types of identities shared online for individuals, including selves rooted in academia, parenting, publishing, activism, politics, religion, and hobbies. Social network sites expose mentees to mentors outside of formalized settings. The informality of the platform changes power dynamics and provides a more complete portrayal of mentors as real people with intersecting identities. Online social networks afford an integration of the self that is encouraged by Black feminist mentoring models. (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012).

Methods rooted in Black feminist epistemology

Because the researchers ground themselves in a Black feminist epistemology our research asserts that research must be practical, accessible, and empowering for the participant, the researcher, and the communities of which both are a part. Positioning participants as authorities about their experiences with mentoring, we sought rich, thick description for the purpose of elucidating best practices from those involved in social network-based mentoring relationships. Semi-structured interviews with seven participants (two advanced graduate students and five tenured faculty) took place over a period of three months. The students specified multiple mentors, and all participants consisted of women of color.

Context collapse facilitates multiple mentors

Participants described their experiences in a sequence that closely follows Kram's (1985) model of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition with one major revision. The initiation of mentoring relationships for participants in this study was often informal and not defined within the boundaries of traditional mentor/mentee relations. Social media affords multiple mentors to mentees; concurrent relationships across mentors were experienced as intimate, supportive, and candid. Online social media fosters positive visibility for mentees and mentors. Participants broadened their

mentoring network and discovered additional mentors through their first mentor's social media network.

Context collapse facilitates holistic selves

A participant described online mentoring relationships as more impactful in providing deep connections than those which she cultivated in person. Her conversations with digital mentors often included advice about work-life balance. She explained, "They see pictures of my kids. They know about my family or when I have a vacation planned because they see the posts. I would never talk about that with my advisor. I think he would see me as less committed to the program if he knew about me watching reality shows or just hanging out with my kid all day on the weekend...they understand the complexities of being an outsider within, of not feeling a sense of belonging in academia and of striking the balance." Overall, participants had the most success with digital mentoring on platforms most actively engaged with for personal use.

Conclusions

Underrepresented populations, specifically women of color, benefit from mentoring relationships with mentors that relate to issues of structural racism, micro-aggressions, and other social injustices they face in their daily lives. Online social media facilitates feminist mentoring by connecting women of color to a model that dispels the idea of the disembodied intellectual and instead integrates their identities as mothers, partners, and community members with their position in higher education. Our model of social media mentoring bridges theory to practice and provides a new possibility for women of color in the academy.

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