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Cross-Cultural Mentoring: Cultural Awareness and Identity Empowerment

Mentorship is a supportive relationship between an experienced person who serves as a "mentor" and a less experienced person who is a "mentee" (Jacobi, 1991). Mentorship improves students' academic performances and motivations (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003) and reduces students' stresses to help them with social adjustment, especially those who need to transition to a new environment (Hill & Reddy, 2007). Mentoring programs at universities are especially important. Mentoring has effectively supported the academic outcomes of students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds. Mentoring thus becomes a necessary and prevalent educational agenda for universities to achieve inclusion and equality in higher education (Crisp, 2018, pp. 16–17).

However, practitioners and scholars have long believed that same-culture mentoring (i.e., mentorship between mentors and mentees who shared a lot of cultural backgrounds, including educational backgrounds, family, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds) is the most beneficial for mentors and mentees, due to similarity-attraction theory which suggests that similarities of backgrounds of mentors and mentees lead to more successful mentoring relationships (Garringer, 2015). Few have examined the possibilities and learning opportunities in cross-cultural mentoring (CCM), a type of mentoring where the mentors or mentees are from different cultural (either national, ethnic, or family) backgrounds. Focusing on students' experiences in CCM, this paper investigates the following questions:

> What motivates mentor/mentees to get involved in CCM?
>
> How do the cultural backgrounds of the mentor and mentee influence their CCM experience?
>
> What impact does CCM bring to both mentor and mentee?

To answer my research questions, I conducted a literature review on cultural mentoring and CCM.

Literature Review

Cultural mentoring. Mentoring has been traditionally discussed in classic literature in the story of Odysseus. The "mentor," an elder male figure, disguised by the goddess Athene, was responsible to care for, guide and groom Odysseus's son, Telemachus, and helping him to reunite with his father (Ehrich, 2004). The meaning of the "mentor" changes along with the political and social contexts

(Joyce, 1997; Kram, 1983), while the traditional hierarchical dynamic in mentoring extends to the context of higher education. In the context of higher education, mentorship usually refers to the academic relationship between professors and students or some senior students with junior students. Formal academic mentoring has been prevalent at universities as it decreases college attrition, improves retention and graduation rate (Crisp et al., 2017; Goff, 2011; Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1988; Larose & Tarabulsy, 2005).

However, critics pointed out that formal academic mentoring tends to set the academic goal over all other needs of the students. Formal mentoring becomes an institutional mechanism to achieve the goal of the institution while ignoring the needs of students for the wholeness of development (Christine, 2014, p. 963). Missing in most higher education mentoring is support for socialization and civic engagement that has proven essential for students' well-being (Christine, 2014). Social and civic-oriented mentoring also transform the hierarchical dynamics into more equal relationships between mentors and mentees.

Oriented in civic and social goals, cultural mentoring was developed which valued the socio-cultural exchange between mentors and mentees (Coley, 2010). "Cultures" here mean both visible and invisible characteristics of a person's background including their geographic origin, family beliefs, value systems, and living habits, etc. (Doole & Lowe, 2001, p. 66). But even though scholars appreciated the social and civic function of cultural connections, most practitioners and researchers only believed in same-cultural mentoring, which is mentorship between mentors and mentees who shared a lot of cultural background (including educational background, family, ethnic, and geographical background).

Most studies only examined the benefits of same-culture mentoring for the mentors and mentees, but few realized how cross-cultural mentoring (CCM) where mentors and mentees have different personal, social-cultural backgrounds could bring learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees. In this study, I focused on cultural backgrounds as an important mediating factor for how mentors and mentees perceive, engage, and are influenced by the mentoring experience. The following section reviews the specific dynamics in CCM.

Cross-cultural mentoring (CCM). Mentoring is socially constructed, which means the effect of mentoring relies on the socio-cultural backgrounds of mentors and mentees (Topping, 1996, p. 6). Cross-cultural mentoring (CCM) is thus regarded as especially important for the development of students whose social capital and educational opportunities have been scarce (Zey, 1988), including non-traditional students (e.g., underrepresented, minority, international students) who have recently become special targets for mentoring programs.

Scholars advocate for cross-cultural connections for underprivileged students who can receive support from mentors with richer social capital.

CCM has thus initiated mentoring among different gender and minority groups (Budge, 2006). Smith (2007) highlighted how CCM was positive for building equality in the society as mentors can transfer their cultural capital (e.g., disposition, attitudes, behaviors) to their cross-cultural mentees that empower them for more academic and social successes. Hill and Reddy (2007) further discussed the benefits of CCM as an effective way to "transmit values, ethics, academic integrity, and professional identity" from the upper-class students to the entrants' students, with its significant supports in empathetic and encouraging conversations and building friendships (p. 99). Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) also emphasized how CCM diversified the student gains.

Meanwhile, scholars started to discuss the challenges of this endeavor of CCM. The ideological differences, gender, and race misunderstandings have been regarded as the major origins for the incompatibility between mentors and mentees that raised serious challenges in mentoring (Ehrich et al., 2004). Clark and Andrew (2009) found complex gender and race issues in mentorship and suggested that mentors and mentees' unwillingness step out of their "homophily" comfort zone and to develop cross-cultural relationships.

As a strategy to overcome challenges, scholars suggested that CCM be flexible—to embrace the differences between their mentees' cultural values and the world view of their own (Ehrich et al., 2004, p. 161). Scholars also argued that the contextual factors, such as the university culture and structure of mentoring, should be set up with sufficient support to leverage the influences (Ehrich et al., 2004, p. 153).

Research Gaps

Existing literature distinguishes cultural mentoring as beneficial for students' holistic development, especially for their social and cultural capital gains (Clark & Andrew, 2009; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Shapiro et al., 1978). However, few scholars collected empirical data to concretize the social and cultural empowerment gained by mentors and mentees in CCM. Even though some scholars researched minority students' mentorship experience, they didn't transcend the "gender and race" cultural discourse and thus fail to include comprehensive socio-cultural identifiers including one's educational and personal backgrounds as well as their approach to knowledge and learning (Toppings, 1996). Besides, students' identity development, cross-cultural understandings, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity have not been examined in a context of a dynamic CCM (Goldie, 2012).

This study thus developed qualitative research to explore how cultural backgrounds impact students' CCM experience, and how they develop the identity and cross-cultural understandings during CCM.

Methods

Study context: The mentoring program. This study was conducted at a student-initiated, university-sponsored peer mentoring program at a research university in the U.S. Though not geared for CCM, this mentoring program has an agenda focusing on not only academic support but also social and civic development of students. The overall aim of the mentoring relationship is for the mentor to support the undergraduate student not only academically but also socially and emotionally, by answering questions about life in graduate school, so that they can be better prepared in their future graduate school application and lives.

Moreover, because of my own participation in the program, I have insider knowledge that helps me familiarize myself with the expected mentoring style and experiences so that I am able to fully understand the interview data.

Students participating in the mentoring program consist of around 100 undergraduate students, and around 70 graduate students at the research university where the mentoring program is hosted. Most of the program participants were from underrepresented backgrounds, which is the special target group that the program aims to recruit from. Each undergraduate student (the "mentee") is paired with a graduate student (the "mentor"). Pairs of mentors and mentees who engaged in CCM were identified based on the demographic information (i.e., cultural backgrounds of students) given by the program.

Study participants. Aiming to examine CCM, this study recruited participants who engaged in CCM in the peer mentoring program. Based on the matching information given by the mentoring program, several pairs of mentors and mentees from different cultural backgrounds (i.e., were engaging in CCM) were identified as potential study participants in this study.

A recruitment email was developed to introduce the study and invite students to participate in this study. The email was sent to students identified as potential participants (those who were engaging in CCM). After receiving responses, five participants (three mentors and two mentees) were confirmed to participate in this study. Table 1 recorded the detailed background information of the five participants:

***Table 1*. Study Participants**

Name	Background	Role	Cross-culture
Elaine	White Master's student	Mentee	Had mentors from the US, Indian, Italian.
Eva	Chinese American Undergraduate	Mentee	Had an American graduate student mentor
Ruth	Queer, White, Doctoral students	Mentor	Had undergraduate mentees of diverse backgrounds.
Ruby	Black, Doctoral student	Mentor	Had undergraduate mentees from diverse backgrounds.
Rebecca	Chinese, Master's student	Mentee & mentor	Had a Japanese doctoral student as a mentor. Had an American undergraduate mentee.

Note. for convenience, mentees' pseudonyms start with "E" and mentors with "R."

Data Collection

To investigate the research questions (e.g., the motivation, experiences, and impacts of CCM), I developed a 60-minute semi-structured interview with each of the five participants. Interviews were conducted toward the end of the mentoring program when the participants already engaged in multiple interactions with their mentors or mentee.

Each interview asked the same list of semi-structured questions, which includes questions that ask participants to share vignettes of their CCM experiences, included but not limited to their experiences in the peer program at the selected university. Follow-up questions are asked to elaborate on their specific challenges, opportunities, and strategies while engaging CCM. These questions were designed to encourage deep reflections from interviewees about the impact and meaning of their CCM experiences.

During the data collection process, field notes are taken in order to remind the researcher of significant moments of participants' CCM experiences. At the end of the interview, I follow Merriam's (2007, p. 131) recommendation on qualitative studies to reflect on the interview data and organize my field notes to "allow the investigator to monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyze the information itself."

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, cleaned, and shared with the study participants for member-checking (Merriam, 2007). Any corrections in the interview data were completed upon request of the study participants.

With the "approved and depersonalized" interview transcripts, "En Vivo" coding was adopted as the first round of coding to analyze the data, where I sorted texts that can be representative for answering the research questions (e.g., motivation, experiences, and impacts of CCM). Then, those representative "En Vivo" codes were organized with another round of "thematic coding," with categorical codes including "mentoring motivation," "types of mentoring," "cultural mentoring," "cross-cultural communication," "identity development," and "cultural awareness," which are the themes derived from the literature review. In both rounds of codings, I focused on specific parts of the transcript and the totality of the interview, as well as in relation to my field notes, and compared different interviews for both triangulation and consistency.

All codes were analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework of CCM, which is the relationship between the cultural backgrounds of students and their mentoring experiences, and how mentors and mentees navigate challenges and opportunities during CCM. Key patterns and themes are derived from the codes, which were then formulated as claims and arguments that can be supported with evidence from interview data. Those arguments were then organized corresponding to the research questions of the motivation, experiences, and impacts of CCM in the findings section.

Findings

Mentors' motivations and types of mentoring. Culture has been defined as shared values with different levels, which has been expanded to include not only the national/ethnic identity of my participants but also family backgrounds, socio-economic status, vocational experiences, educational experiences, gender, and age. Based on the understanding of culture, three types of mentoring have been identified by participants in cross-cultural mentoring. Straightforward mentoring is information-sharing and skill/strategy sharing (such as how to apply to graduate school, how to prepare for exams, and how to arrange a time). Personal mentoring develops informally around life and personal emotional supports (such as encouragement).

Different types of mentoring were offered due to the motivations of the mentors. The motivation for getting involved in straightforward mentoring was information-seeking behaviors. Eva, Rebecca, and Elaine, all involved in

straightforward mentoring because of a demand to pass around academic knowledge as they felt overwhelmed in a new academic setting. Rebecca, an international student, needed hard adjustments to her academic journey. Elaine, on the other hand, is a local U.S. student, but she confronted confusion in a new program. Feeling a lack of guidance, Elaine wants to be a mentor for someone who may share similar feelings of confusion and being overwhelmed. Elaine said the commonality made her think of humanity. The realization of commonality and felt of connectedness also makes the mentoring experience more relaxing.

Personal mentoring is motivated by the shared difficulties of experiencing academics or life between the mentors and mentees. Ruby shared the same difficulties in her undergraduate experiences with her mentee, which Ruby described as the motivation for why she had become a mentor: "I want to help students out by providing navigation toward their graduate school application because it was a confusing and overwhelming process for me and I hoped to get help from some mentor." Ruby especially hoped to "endow the confidence to my mentee and to encourage them towards the graduate school preparation process." However, unlike Elaine, Ruby's identity as a black woman has become another important motivation for her being a mentor. Ruby summarized, "I became a mentor in order to promote their identity who usually meet the same difficulties like me." She was involved in mentorship because of her own identity, background, and experiences.

Cultural mentoring: A lighthouse to identity. Cultural mentoring is about how to navigate the racial and ethnic aspects of life. Cultural mentoring—supporting mentees with the same or similar identity—was a common theme for all mentors. Ruth reflected on her time of being a mentor for a group of high school students who were figuring out their identities and were having identity crises. Ruth reflected back on her own identity development: "I am a queer and it took me a long struggle to accept and be who I am." She understood the importance of mentorship because "having a role model in life is so essential for a student who is figuring out who they are." I was touched when Ruth described her mentorship as a "lighthouse," helping students in identity crisis out of confusing dark moments:

I feel like they need like . . . just lost the word . . . the lights on the seashore, they needed a lighthouse, they needed a lighthouse! Like they needed some kind of beacon where they would like to go and find each other.

Ruth wants to be "the lighthouse" for her students because "there were so few who teach and mentor about queer identity." "There are so few people supporting them," said Ruth, "I was the only one who was open to being a queer in the high school." Ruth recalled that there were a bunch of students who were

figuring out their identity and they came to her and sought her advice. Ruth said "I was upfront and that could encourage so much for my students" and it was the mentorship that made Ruth realize how students would need support "to see, to know, and to make sure where they can go and who they can be."

The goal of Ruth's mentorship was to become the role model, the "lighthouse," and to provide the support that was lacking. "I was like, well, guess what, I am gonna fly a little higher here so they know where they go." Ruth supported her mentees by being upfront about who she is, a queer, and "that's because they (students in identity crisis) needed that." Ruth elaborated:

> I became a mentor because my students asked me to. Then I realized the importance of mentorship by being the lighthouse to build up the very strong identity of being a queer and to guide them out from identity crises and difficulties.

Focusing on identity development, Ruth said cultural mentoring is something she needed to do rather than "set out to do," especially for "sexual orientation" which has been the one thing Ruth so cared about and she wanted to help her mentees to develop the confidence about their identity. The identity development became a mutual benefit action. As a mentor, Ruth gained from her mentorship: "mentoring queer students gives me a sense of who I am," and "when I tell people, over and over and over again. Like this is okay this is okay this is okay. Even if I don't entirely sure I believe it to start with, I started believing it anyway."

This same identity factor revealed in cultural mentoring also embedded for other types of mentorship after pondering. Ruby realized that straightforward mentoring also embedded opportunities to discuss and develop identity. Ruby recognized the cultural sensitivity difficulty in her transitioning from a black college to a new university.

Difficulties and empowerments in cross-cultural mentoring. Ruby's difficulty and empowerment. Many mentors and mentees seemed to have enjoyed same-culture mentoring. For example, Ruby said she was excited about sharing so many similarities with her mentees and she would rather choose to mentor those who shared the queer identity, as this is what motivates her and she wants to help the most. Ruby would like to and felt it was necessary to take part in cross-cultural mentoring. Ruby summarized: "There are actually commonalities out of the differences." For example, "different ethnic groups could share the same social stereotypical perception" reflected by Ruby. Though the culture is different,

there are many other similarities and common experiences waiting for the mentor and mentee to be dug out.

Rebecca's difficulty and empowerment. CCM brings both caution and awareness about culture. Rebecca (from China) had a Japanese mentor and any discussion on culture would be a cautious and hesitant one for her to engage in. Rebecca shared an incident when her Japanese mentor once discussed the Chinese character with her. Rebecca was concerned when they were having this discussion: "He (the Japanese mentor) may think Chinese culture is superior to his culture." "Chinese and Japanese culture are very similar and we have common sense," Rebecca reflected on her hesitation, "It was because of the sensitive relationship between China and Japan." The power dynamic was recognized by Rebecca and became a sensitive topic that she was not sure how to handle. Rebecca further explained: "You know something that is very normal in our Chinese culture can be very sensitive in another culture." Rebecca further pondered that "maybe something is very natural in your mind can be strange in other people's minds." Caution has been the number one difficulty for Rebecca to engage in cross-cultural interaction and to share different cultures openly.

However, through her everyday engagement with necessary cross-cultural communication, Rebecca received a sense of confidence in her homeland culture. Rebecca reflected that every person has their strengths and weaknesses and "culture cannot be a weakness for international students or a strength for local students." Along with his confidence, Rebecca realized that "I do not need to change myself and to assimilate to the local culture" because "it is the homeland value (culture) that makes me different from the local people."

Elaine's difficulty and empowerment. Similar to most mentors and mentees, at first, Elaine felt the difficulty of engaging in cross-cultural conversations. While later she found the new culture was inspiring and full of opportunities for learning. She shared an example when she asked about India's "arranged marriage." The cross-cultural communication over the different understanding of marriage had helped her to melt doubts: "It doesn't seem as crazy to me now. It now makes a lot of sense as they believed the benefits of rationality over romance in marriage." The conversation further made her think and reflect on the romance of the western and started to help her "break up my own little world shaped by my past experience." Elaine does not regret or feel bad about her past experiences growing up, but realized how it is "just kind of like a bubble and its own world" and recognized a bigger world that was different and brought so many opportunities of learning in her mind. Elaine was empowered by her experience in new cultures and learning and understanding them: "That was like, it gives me more confidence in my ability to just like function in the world." Communication over differences has been key to help Elaine dissolve stereotypes,

establish mutual understanding, and build up an appreciation for cultural differences.

Ruth's difficulty and empowerment. In fact, there are many examples to illustrate how mentoring is cross-cultural since differences are prevalent in daily life. Elaine shared that living in the same state, she and her friend are very different, let alone people from different areas and backgrounds. Another example is that, though the mentor and mentee shared the same identity of being queer, the mentorship met a major challenge when the mentee's family had a different belief in identity. "The mom does not accept the kid I was mentoring to be a queer," Ruth shared. "It was honestly scary when the mom was furious about me and blamed me 'rubbing some gay agenda in her kid's face.'" Ruth struggled to make sense of the mentorship: "I recognized enough of that to be like . . . okay, this is not about me. This is this mom having a hard time because she doesn't understand her kid. " With patience, Ruth worked with the mother until one day the mother found, "Oh wait, like, my kid's actually happier." The family's involvement in the same-cultural mentoring proved an interesting point which is the diversity in our background that could make a deeply cross-cultural mentorship.

Ruth reflected that even she and her mentee shared the same queer identity, they were so different in other aspects including family and religious backgrounds. Ruth reflected: "people come with all sorts of different biases, and even really strong biases" but challenges posed by different beliefs and "culture" (e.g., family belief in this case) could "slowly move to a learning opportunity for both sides." Ruth reacted to misunderstandings with hope. Ruth found though there won't be a mentee with exactly the same identity and background, they could still understand each other by "finding the common ground" Ruth appreciated that cross-cultural mentoring was a transformative experience. Even though they share so much culture (i.e., identity, experience, and background), many same-culture mentorships actually consist of diverse cross-cultural components.

Ruth was empowered after witnessing the possible transformation of a person from a different worldview. Ruth realized that she had to ask so many identity backgrounds in order to provide good advice: "I needed to gain enough understanding of where the other person is coming from to be able to have a constructive conversation." She reflected they made an effort to be a good mentor —by actively talking, asking, and for cross-cultural mentoring, to find the commonality and common ground to rest all the trust and learning opportunities.
Ruth suggested that a good mentor needs to engage in active talking, asking, and cross-cultural mentoring, to find the commonality and common ground to rest all the trust and learning opportunities. She pointed out the importance of mentors being a good listener and being patient about the situation with hope for the

possibilities of change and transformation. “If you can stick it out for long enough” (Ruth), the misunderstanding will dissolve and the transformation will happen. The mentorship has thus been significant for identity development both for the mentor and for the mentee. The mentor’s identity was empowered by sharing their experiences themselves to their mentees, while the mentees grew such confidence in their identity and ability because their mentors have supported them with patience and love.

Conclusion and Discussion

This qualitative study provided consolidating and interpretive evidence about how mentoring cross-culturally could be a unique learning opportunity that same-culture mentoring may not offer. In CCM, students from different socio-cultural backgrounds were connected. Due to the cross-cultural connection, students’ (both mentors and mentees) were challenged and meanwhile empowered. Through communications and reflection, students developed cultural awareness and self-awareness in two ways: (a) they discovered cross-cultural connections and differences between one another during mentoring, and (b) they further developed their own identity - a process where they discovered who they are and established their mental model of self (Banks, 2008; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Erikson, 1974; Hall, 1996; Palmer et al., 2015).

Additionally, I also illustrated how prevalent cross-cultural mentoring actually exists even for mentors and mentees who shared a lot of background (e.g., identity, ethnic and educational experiences). Thus, I recommend that universities provide more educational resources on cross-cultural communications such as cultural conflict management and culturally-responsive interaction strategies. These resources will help generate better experiences and outcomes of mentoring activities as well as to build friendships and relationships generally.

Due to the empowering impact of CCM, I argue CCM is an active learning strategy and activity that can be beneficial for both mentors and mentees to cultivate not only academic and social skills but also self-awareness and cultural recognition, which are all important aspects of one’s comprehensive development at universities (Crisp et al., 2017). I recommend universities use CCM as a learning tool to develop cultural awareness and identity development of students. With these positive impacts on students’ wholeness development, CCM could be an important CCM strategy for universities to build a more respecting, inclusive, and diverse learning community.

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