Dialectical tensions experienced by diversified mentoring dyads

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine diversified mentoring relationships (DMRs) at a mid-sized Midwestern state university (MMSU) in the USA.

Design/methodology/approach – The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 MMSU faculty members and professional personnel who comprised seven diversified mentoring dyads. The mentees were primarily members of underrepresented minority (URMs) groups, whereas the majority of mentors were members of the dominant culture.

Findings – A thematic analysis of the data, grounded in the literature on developmental relationships and relational dialectics theory (RDT), reveals tensions that diversified mentoring dyads experienced, as well as communication strategies that dyad members used to manage these tensions.

Research limitations/implications – Although this research is limited by its small sample size and unique geographic location, the findings offer in-depth insight and practical implications for URM faculty members in predominantly white institutions around the globe.

Practical implications – The findings of this study have important implications for training supervisors, mentors, and senior colleagues of URM faculty members.

Originality/value – This study is unique in that it examines DMRs from a dyadic communication perspective; moreover, it applies RDT to DMRs in organizations.

Keywords Developmental relationships, Mentorship of early career faculty members, Communication and interaction processes, Diversified mentoring, Relational dialectics

Paper type Research paper

This paper integrates theory and research from the disciplines of communication, psychology, and management to explore the dialectical tensions experienced by diversified mentoring dyads. Ragins (1997) coined the term "diversified mentoring relationships" (DMRs), which are comprised of "mentors and protégés who differ on one or more group memberships associated with power in organizations" (p. 489). Although race is only one of many demographic variables (e.g. sex, class, disability, etc.) that may affect power differences in organizations, it is the dimension of diversity that is most salient to this project. Understanding the intersection of race and mentoring is critical, given the context of increasing workforce diversity in a global economy (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2007). Studying DMRs in the academy is a worthwhile endeavor because faculty of color face several barriers to promotion and tenure, such as racism, tokenism, being overburdened with and under-rewarded for diversity-related service, and lack of mentoring (Allen, 2000; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2004; Thompson, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 1999, 2011).

This paper makes three unique contributions to the literature. First, given that most DMR scholarship is rooted in psychology and management (Ragins and Kram, 2007), examining this phenomenon from a communication perspective has the potential to generate new knowledge. Second, although relational dialectics (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996) is an established theoretical perspective in communication studies, most of the extant research concerns interpersonal communication. Although a few studies have explored dialectics in organizations (e.g. Apker *et al.*, 2005; Bridge and

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Baxter, 1992; Jameson, 2004; Kellet, 1999), no studies have yet been conducted on relational dialectics in DMRs. Third, one of the limitations of the existing literature about DMRs is that most studies focus on the protégés' perceptions of DMRs. As Ragins (1999) noted, "it is advantageous to obtain data from both the mentor and the protégé" (p. 235). Therefore, this study will examine both mentors' and protégés' perceptions about dialectical tensions in DMRs.

In the following paper, I provide a brief review of the literature about DMRs and relational dialectics. Next, I describe the methods that I used to gather data from underrepresented minority (URM) faculty members and professional personnel at a mid-sized Midwestern state university (MMSU) in the USA. I then report the findings of a thematic analysis of the data, which revealed a number of tensions that DMR dyads experienced, as well as communication strategies that dyad members used to manage these tensions. Finally, I explore the practical and methodological implications of the findings for future practice and research related to DMRs.

Review of the literature

DMRs

One of the limitations of the existing mentoring research is that it is based primarily on the experiences of European Americans. Over two decades ago, Kalbfleisch and Davies (1991) challenged communication scholars to explore racial issues in mentoring. Since then, relatively few scholars – none in the discipline of communication – have examined the racial dynamics of mentoring relationships: One notable exception is Ragins (1997), a social psychologist who theorized about behavioral and perceptual processes and outcomes associated with mentors and protégés who differ on one or more group memberships associated with power in organizations. Ragins proposed a number of differences that are likely to exist between homogeneous and heterogeneous mentoring relationships. Regarding interpersonal communication, she argued that members of DMRs may experience less interpersonal comfort than members of a homogeneous mentoring relationship. Another scholar who focussed explicitly on communication in DMRs is Thomas (1993). Thomas, a management scholar, conducted a qualitative investigation of the dynamics of cross-race developmental relationships among 22 African-American and white mentors and protégés. Specifically, Thomas was interested in examining people's strategies for communicating about racial issues. He found that the extent to which mentors and protégés agreed about communication strategies used to manage tensions in their relationship (i.e. whether to discuss openly, suppress, or deny racial differences) influenced relationship quality, such that greater complementarity resulted in more supportive relationships. Although Thomas' work is salient because he focussed explicitly on communication strategies in DMR dyads, his typology is rather limited; therefore, future research should examine a wider repertoire of strategies that mentors and protégés employ to manage relational tensions. Relational dialectics theory (RDT) offers a solid theoretical foundation for this line of inquiry.

RDT

RDT (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996) posits that relationships are characterized by contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. According to Baxter and Braithwaite (2008), RDT has three central propositions: meanings emerge from the struggle of different, often opposing, discourses; the interpenetration of discourses is both synchronic and diachronic; and the interpenetration of competing discourses constitutes social reality. In essence, relationships are characterized by discursive tensions or struggles.

Relational partners socially construct their reality through discourse, which embodies these tensions. Some of the most widely studied tensions include integration-separation (sometimes referred to as autonomy-connection) and expression-nonexpression (also known as openness-closedness) (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2010).

As previously stated, most of the existing research about relational dialectics has been conducted in the interpersonal context. Some notable exceptions that explore dialectics in organizations include Apker *et al.* (2005), Bridge and Baxter (1992), Jameson (2004), and Kellet (1999). Bridge and Baxter explored dialectical tensions in work friendships at a university, which is most germane to mentoring relationships in the academy. In their survey of 162 university employees and students, they found that friends in the workplace experienced dialectical tensions of impartiality-favoritism, openness-closedness, autonomy-connection, and judgment-acceptance. In addition, they found that workplace friends used three strategies to manage dialectical tensions: selection (privileging one dimension of the relationship over another), separation (compartmentalization), and integration (reframing the situation to defuse tension). Integration was negatively related to dual-role tension and positively related to work-group cohesion. The authors noted that status unequals were more likely to employ selection than were status equals.

Relational dialectics in diversified mentoring dyads

As noted earlier, Thomas (1993) identified three communication strategies that mentors and protégés used to address racial differences: open discussion, suppression, or denial. These strategies are similar to Baxter and Braithwaite's (2010) expression-nonexpression or openness-closedness dialectic. In addition, Thomas's finding that greater complementarity in strategy selection resulted in more supportive relationships suggest that competing discursive strategies may have negative implications for relationship quality. Recall that Bridge and Baxter (1992) found that status unequals were more likely to employ selection to manage dialectical tensions than were status equals. As mentors tend to be unequal in status, one would expect that mentors and mentees would be most likely to employ selection as a strategy for managing dialectical tensions.

This review of the DMR and relational dialectics literature leads me to pose the following research questions:

RQ1. What dialectical tensions do mentors and protégés in DMRs experience?

RQ2. What discursive strategies do mentors and protégés employ to manage dialectical tensions?

RQ3. Do competing discursive strategies have negative implications for relationship quality?

Methods

Participants and procedures

After securing Institutional Review Board approval, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews about DMRs with URM faculty members and professional personnel at MMSU. (For a detailed description of the context, see Meyer and Warren-Gordon, 2013.) I used network and snowball sampling (Baxter and Babbie, 2004) to identify 31 potential participants who were current or retired URM faculty members or professional personnel. I chose to employ network and snowball sampling because at the time of this study, MMSU did not have a method of identifying faculty and professional personnel

who were members of URM groups. In order to identify a network of prospective participants, I enlisted the assistance of a senior colleague who was a prominent member of the African-American community on campus. He gave me permission to mention his name when I recruited individuals for this study, which may partially explain the study's high response rate among mentees (71 percent). However, because the network that he generated was composed primarily of African-American faculty, I decided to use snowball sampling to identify additional prospective participants who were members of other underrepresented groups (e.g. Hispanic and Asian-American). Unfortunately, this sampling strategy did not result in a significantly more diverse pool of participants: When I asked one Mexican American respondent if she could give me the names of other Latinos or Latinas on campus, she said, "I don't even know if I'm the only one on this campus. I doubt it, but I sure don't see a lot of us out there. I don't know." Similarly, a mixed-race respondent who was part Asian-American suggested that I check a database of university faculty profiles to identify people who looked Asian-American. Their comments demonstrate the difficulty that some minority faculty members may have had networking with others who shared similar racial or ethnic backgrounds. In addition, they call into question one of the assumptions of snowball sampling: that members of marginalized populations know one another well enough to give referrals.

Two prospects moved away during the course of the study and seven chose not to participate. Although one cannot know with certainty how participants differed from nonrespondents, one can infer that participants may have been more interested in and had more positive experiences related to mentoring than did nonrespondents. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011) with the remaining 22 people, eliciting their narratives about DMRs. Some of the questions that I asked participants were, "Can you describe how your mentor/mentee was similar to or different from you in terms of demographic characteristics? (If different) Did these differences ever make it difficult for you to develop or maintain a relationship with that person? (If yes) How did you overcome your differences?" Toward the end of the interview, I asked participants if I could contact their mentors to learn about their perspectives on the mentoring relationship. Ten respondents gave me permission to contact their mentors. Seven of those mentors agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a 70 percent response rate among mentors. However, as noted above, one can speculate that the mentors whose mentees agreed to let me contact them and the mentors who agreed to participate in the study may have had more positive mentoring experiences than did those who either were not nominated or who declined to participate in the study. Interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes in length; each transcribed interview was approximately 8.5 pages long, resulting in a total of more than 120 pages of single-spaced text. Once I transcribed an interview, I emailed the text to the respondent, who verified its accuracy. As I guaranteed respondents confidentiality, I replaced participants' names with pseudonyms and omitted or changed nonessential identifiers in the final version of the transcripts.

The final sample consisted of 14 participants: seven mentors and seven mentees. They ranged in age from 36 to 82: The median age for mentors was 55; the median age for mentees was 48. Although I agree with Orbe and Drummond (2009), who cautioned that commonly used racial and ethnic labels reflect essentialist categories, I report here, for descriptive purposes, that the sample consisted of five African-Americans, five European Americans, one Hispanic, one Asian, one Caribbean-born American, and one who identified as mixed race (European American and Asian-American). Most of the

mentors (71 percent) were European American and most of the mentees (57 percent) were African-American. There were eight females and six males; 12 faculty members and two professional personnel. Most of the mentors (85 percent) were tenured full professors; most of the mentees (57 percent) were tenured associate professors.

Analysis

In order to answer my research questions, I conducted an iterative thematic analysis (Tracy, 2013) of the data. Drawing upon contemporary versions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Lindlof and Taylor, 2011), my analytic process alternated between emic and etic coding (Tracy, 2013). I began by immersing myself in the data: Given that I transcribed the interviews myself, I spent several hours revisiting each conversation. Despite the fact that some people may perceive this task to be tedious, I enjoyed reliving the conversations because the process brought me closer to my participants. Next, as I engaged in member checks (Ellingson, 2009) to verify the accuracy of my transcriptions, I made notes in the margins about whether or not respondents wanted me to use a pseudonym, remove identifiers, edit any statements, or approve any verbatim quotations that I used in the final paper.

During the primary stage of my analysis, I engaged in first level (Tracy, 2013), initial (Charmaz, 2006), or open coding (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). I combed the edited transcripts sentence by sentence for statements about the quality of mentoring relationships and the challenges that respondents had experienced. I used a manual approach to coding, using a pencil to underline statements that pertained to my research questions. I then used edge-coding to label these statements with words that encapsulated the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that the participants described (e.g. "felt supported" or "felt unsupported"). These first-level codes (Tracy, 2013) were inductively derived and descriptive in nature.

During the next stage of my analysis, I engaged in second level (Tracy, 2013), focussed (Charmaz, 2006), or axial coding (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). I compared participants' statements to concepts identified in the literature about DMRs and dialectical tensions (e.g. Bridge and Baxter, 1992; Ragins, 1997; Thomas, 1993), paying particular attention to comments that pertained to dialectical tensions in mentoring relationships, as well as to discursive strategies employed to manage those tensions. For example, if a mentee felt supported or unsupported, I would scan for evidence that suggested that he or she felt judged or accepted by the mentor. If I identified a dialectical tension, I would try to ascertain how the participants negotiated that tension (e.g. I would jot down "selection" if they chose their role as a mentor over that of a supervisor or vice versa). In addition, I paid special attention to the discursive strategies that respondents used to frame dialectical tensions. Here, I relied upon the literature about discursive strategies used to frame racial boundaries (e.g. Buttny, 1999) to refine and support my inductive observations. For example, when participants talked about how they were similar to or different from one another, I noted instances in which they minimized differences.

As I repeatedly combed through the transcripts, I observed similar patterns that emerged among respondents, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies in the data. I highlighted conflicting statements that indicated possible ambivalence or ideological dilemmas. For example, when a participant characterized her mentor as a friend, but then added the caveat that it was only "somewhat of a friendship," I drew attention to the discrepancy. Throughout the process, I added analytic comments or memos (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2013) that explored how the coding categories related to one

another. For example, I observed that the use of similar discursive strategies seemed to be associated with dyadic relational quality. Finally, I solicited member reflections (Tracy, 2010) by sharing a draft of my paper with some of my participants and inviting them to assess the accuracy of my analysis. The fact that I created a space in which to dialogue about my findings with my participants enhances the credibility of my research. Given that no one raised questions about my interpretation of the data or requested that I make substantive changes, I am confident about the plausibility of my analysis. The following observations, grouped by theme and ordered by frequency, were generated from respondents' narratives.

Results

Constructions of difference

Given that a selection criterion for the sample was being a participant in a DMR, all respondents identified demographic differences between themselves and their mentoring partner; however, most respondents juxtaposed those differences with similarities in values or personality. This pattern was particularly prevalent among mentors. For example, one Asian mentor, Nalin, made this comment about his African-American mentee, Leon: "He grew up in a different environment. He comes from a different culture." However, he immediately minimized the differences by saying, "If you forget about the body, I think that we're very similar." He then elaborated on similarities that they shared in teaching philosophy and fundamental values. Similarly, a European American female, Carrie, described her mentee in this way: "Pete is one quarter Filipino – that is a fact on the table – but he pretty much presents as White. I feel like we're more similar than we are different. When it comes to how we teach or write, we are so similar that it's frightening." Logan, a White male mentor, said, "I don't see Kiara as an African-American female. I see her as an equal, a person who is educated, who has a similar educational background as myself." Logan continued, "We couldn't be more different in terms of the standard demographic characteristics (race, gender, religious background), but I have found few people in my professional career who are more similar to me in terms of my personality. We have very similar views on the world, work ethic, parenting, etc."

Dialectical tensions

Regarding *RQ1*, respondents identified a number of challenges related to their differences. Most issues pertained to discrepant communication styles or work ethics. Although three respondents alluded to a dialectical tension related to openness-closedness, most respondents focussed on tensions pertaining to judgment-acceptance. In one dyad, members identified different tensions. In another dyad, members noted the same tension. In a third dyad, members labeled one tension similarly, but another tension differently. In two other dyads, the mentees didn't perceive any tensions related to difference. However, both of the mentors (one African-American female and one European American female) alluded to a judgment-acceptance dialectical tension. Kana, an African-American female mentor, criticized her mentee, Lilly, a Caribbean-born American, in the following way: "Sometimes she says things that I wish she would think through a little more. For example, she has spoken very candidly with a colleague, saying some things that were true and heartfelt, but could have been framed more professionally and less personally." Similarly, Pat, a European American female, criticized her mentee, a Hispanic male named Jaime, in terms of his communication style: "He could be a little sarcastic or just not as positive with other staff members.

He didn't laugh or smile easily. He was very serious." Because both of these criticisms concern negative evaluation, they evidence the judgment-acceptance dialectic.

In one dyad, the mentor, a European American female named Penny, criticized her mentee Etta's communication style: "Etta can be very private and there are times when you don't know whether she's actually responding or not. (Laughter)." Clearly, Penny perceived a dialectical tension related to openness-closedness that frustrated her: "It was a little bit like pulling teeth […] It's hard to have a conversation with somebody if they're not going to give you a full response." As Penny talked about Etta's lack of expressiveness, she struggled to make sense of it: "The fact that I was Department Chair and having to speak for promotion and tenure or salary sometimes made mentoring a little bit difficult because it changed the relationship a little bit […] It could also be that she just felt more threatened because she's Black and I'm White. But she's older than I and she knows a whole lot more about the world than I do. (Laughter)."

Interestingly, Etta perceived relational tensions in a much different way. Rather than viewing the openness-closedness dialectic as the primary problem, she viewed it as a consequence of working in an environment where she experienced tokenism and racism. When I asked her to tell me about her mentoring relationship with Penny, she said:

> Penny was a particularly useful person to take problems to and to discuss them with, and that was above and beyond anything we had, we would ordinarily find. And here she was chair of the department. Even toward the end, when I was having this battle with the last chair, she offered to be the person to show me the way.

Ironically, Etta pointed out that, at times, the career-enhancing support offered by her mentor had negative unintended consequences:

> I was put on every committee that could possibly have any connection to my department, and knowing nothing. So of course, I'm a body. (Laughter). And after a while, it begins to show; there is nothing I can contribute to these organizations. I think it was Penny's way of showing how interested in diversity she was, without realizing the detriment to me personally.

Etta described her response to this situation in the following way:

> I didn't, I could not deal with it and I realized that my contributions were not uh, in the academic tones that they wanted to have. Therefore, I became a recluse […] When other people came along, and wanted me to get involved in some of these things, I refused, and of course, signed my own death warrant. Uh, it got so bad that I decided I didn't need this anymore and turned in a resignation just after Christmas in 2007. Free, free at last. (Laughter).

Clearly, Etta experienced the dialectic of judgment-acceptance, as she felt like a token member of committees where her contributions were not valued. Later on, I asked her whether she ever experienced challenges in her mentoring relationships because of the demographic differences that existed between her and her mentors. (Penny was only one of the mentors that Etta identified.) She said:

> There's one instance that really probably made me push away from them more than anything else. One of the committee chairs had brought his child to the office one day. Passing in the hall, and I'm being the adult, and "how do you do?" and "let me shake your hand," and the child is open-eyed and shocked […] but offers her hand and then after the shake, proceeds to wipe it on her dress. It was at this point that I said, "I don't need this anymore. I don't need *any* of this anymore." So […] uh, the artificiality of the whole thing impressed me […] made me see […] walk away.

When I asked her whether there was anybody to whom she could vent about this racist incident, she replied that our conversation was the first time that she had ever

mentioned it. She said, "Who was I to talk to?" Because she did not feel comfortable disclosing the racist incident to Penny, she responded to the situation by suppressing her feelings. Penny was clearly oblivious to Etta's feelings of alienation caused by tokenism and racism: "She came to parties at my house – she might have been the only Black person there, but she talked with other people and people loved having her there."

In another dyad, Kiara, an African-American female, discussed openness-closedness tensions that she experienced with her White male mentor, Logan. In the following excerpt, she explained her reservations about engaging in personal disclosure with him:

> He's a White guy, y'know? He's not a mother. He has children, but the things I have to balance vs. the things he has to balance are different: It's the difference between a male who is probably the head of his household and has got full [professor status] and tenure – you know, a person who is there and a person who is struggling to get there. There are some things that I wouldn't even broach to him because I didn't think he would be able to understand.

In this instance, Kiara chose the strategy of suppression. In another instance, she engaged Logan in open conversation:

> For example – and I've talked to him about this a little bit – one of the things that our department really doesn't like is for tenure-track faculty to teach during the summer. It's not a written rule that we don't teach in the summer, but it's somewhat frowned upon. Well, with two little kids and an economy that's not good, I could really use that money. (Laughter.) From a mentoring standpoint, he understands that, but he's like, "Well, if you can just hold off, tenure is just down the road, yadayada."

In this instance, Kiara openly expressed her desire to teach summer classes to Logan – and later invalidated his advice when she framed it as "yadayada" to me – but nevertheless continued to follow her mentor's suggestion, sacrificing her family's economic interests to increase her likelihood of earning tenure and promotion.

Interestingly, Logan didn't perceive that the openness-closedness dialectic was a problem in their relationship. As he said to me, "We've talked about all kinds of things […] relationship issues […] We have all kinds of conversations that are confidential, you know?" Although he didn't explicitly identify any challenges related to their different social positioning, he did describe a challenge that he helped Kiara overcome:

> One instance, in particular, had to do with this article that involved some – I wouldn't call it really sophisticated analysis, but you had to know how to present the findings in the text of the article. I said, "Why don't you take a stab at creating these tables?" She struggled and struggled and struggled and struggled. I helped and gave her suggestions and things. She sent me some things and I looked at them and said, "I don't really think that's what we want to do." So I kind of redid them. It was pretty quick: I redid them really quickly because I've done it so many times. I sent them to her. It wasn't very long after that – it was the same day – she called me and she was very upset at herself because she thought that she wasn't competent. She said, "Do you think I'm a terrible researcher because I couldn't do these?" I said, "No. Not at all. I mean, you tried. You did your best. I took them, did something. You can use these as a learning tool. It's all good. There's nothing going on with me. I have no opinion like that at all." I assured her of that, but she was worried about how I would perceive her because I took that material and reworked it so differently.

Logan framed this issue as a tension related to judgment-acceptance. As a junior colleague collaborating on a research project, Kiara was concerned that Logan would view her as being incompetent because she failed to complete a task satisfactorily. She initiated open discussion about the issue and Logan responded with affirming,

nonjudgmental language that demonstrated acceptance. Although Kiara did not mention this incident, she did allude to the fact that judgment-acceptance was a tension in the relationship:

> I would say that the mentoring relationship has become somewhat of a friendship – as close of a friend that you can have when that person is a mentor and at the same time that person also has a key to your future in that, you know, at some point they'll be voting as to whether you'll get tenure or not. You can only get so close to somebody, you know? (Laughter). But I think we're close. We're friends.

Similar to Etta, Kiara viewed openness-closedness as being contingent upon judgment-acceptance.

As mentioned previously, only one dyad framed their dialectical tensions in similar ways. Fred, a European American man, described some differences between himself and his mentee, Wilma, related to their work style and priorities, issues that reflect the judgment-acceptance dialectic:

> When we look at differences, we probably have a list of "groups we've helped." But I think I know when to bail – a 3-year term's enough, as opposed to life. I think she stays in the trenches to try to make it totally right. Also, while I don't consider myself anal retentive, I think I'm quite meticulously organized. Wilma? Not always the case. I think that makes us quite different.

Wilma identified one way that she and Fred were different. She told a story about how Fred (who was her department chairperson as well as her mentor) engaged her in open discussion about some students who had complained about her:

> Sure as shooting, midway through the semester, he says, "Wilma, all three of them have been in and say that you're really unkind to them and one even had another guy shoot the footage and you still gave her a bad grade on it and he's one of our better production students".

She reflected on what she perceived to be Fred's failure to back her up: "I have a problem with what I call 'plastic White women.' He was reared on nice girls. And that's still a problem." In this instance, Fred chose selection (his supervisory role) over his role as a mentor. In another instance, Wilma described how she and Fred had different perspectives about working with students:

> My first year, I was finishing up my PhD and Dr. Fred told me, "Don't work with student groups." Well, when you come to a campus like MMSU and you have students of color with no real mentor, saying, "Don't work with student groups" is like saying "Go run in front of a car." I could not do that. There may be other Black professors who could have just said, "Okay, I'm going to just finish my dissertation and be through." I spent extra time to be here and be at LMSU at the same time because there were student groups that needed me. They had cultural needs that needed to be addressed and there weren't enough Black faculty members here to address them. I also found out I had Hispanic students who had nobody to talk to. So I just ended up […] anybody of color […] stop by Dr. Wilma's office. Oh, you're gay and nobody will talk to you? Stop by Dr. Wilma's office! (Laughter).

In this excerpt, Wilma used humor to frame her experience as the only Black faculty member in her college, as well as the primary advisor for most students of color. As Reddick (2012) observed, when white male professors mentor students of color, it reduces the service burden of URM faculty, potentially removing one barrier to advancement. Ironically, Fred was in a position to help Wilma by offering to mentor some of her students; however, he chose not to. Moreover, he framed his unwillingness to "stay in the trenches" as a wise service decision.

Discursive strategies for managing dialectical tensions

In response to *RQ2*, participants revealed a variety of discursive strategies used to manage dialectical tensions. In the dyads where only the mentor perceived that a tension existed, both of the mentors who alluded to a judgment-acceptance dialectical tension chose to engage in mediation when they addressed the issue. Kana said, "My job was to smooth the ruffled feathers of both parties and negotiate a professional truce." Similarly, Pat said, "If there was tension between him and another staff member, I would put them in the same room and try and straighten the issue out. I also might talk to him individually." In both instances, the mentors chose selection, privileging their supervisory role over their role as a mentor.

In the dyad where the mentee and mentor framed the dialectical tensions differently, they also responded to the tension differently. Penny wanted to have open discussion and felt frustrated that Etta chose suppression. However, when Penny acknowledged that her role as departmental chairperson and promotion and tenure committee member made mentoring difficult, she invoked the strategy of separation. When Etta described her choice to resign from the department, she evidenced selection, choosing to "save her soul" rather than stay in a department where she was subjected to tokenism and racism.

In the dyad where the mentor and mentee identified the same tension, they chose similar discursive strategies. Wilma alluded to open discussions that she had with Fred about student complaints and student advising. Reflecting on these discussions, Fred said, "Oftentimes, if we're chatting about that, it reaches a nonverbal impasse because that's one of those moments when one of us knows they're right and the other one thinks they're right and it's not going to go any further. So there's no need to hammer away at that." In these conversations, Fred and Wilma agreed to disagree. Fred employed selection: sometimes privileging his role as a supervisor; other times putting his role as a mentor first. Wilma also chose selection: choosing her identity as an African-American over her identity as a mentee who is supposed to eagerly follow her mentor's wise advice. In both instances, her response to Fred's supervision and mentoring behavior – promotion be damned – was to go on doing exactly what she was doing because she believed that it was the right thing to do. As she told Fred, "I'm sorry. I answer to a higher calling." In this case, Wilma employed an integrative strategy to reframe the situation: By invoking a higher authority, she defused tension caused by her unwillingness to follow Fred's advice.

In the case of Kiara and Logan, both parties chose open discussion in response to tensions related to judgment-acceptance in the collaborative process. In the exchange about the journal article, Kiara performed the role of mentee. In turn, Logan accepted, rather than judged Kiara, indicating a strategy of selection, choosing his role as a mentor over that of a competitive colleague. Logan also demonstrated an integrative strategy, reframing Kiara's mistake as a learning experience. However, regarding the openness-closedness dialectic, Kiara perceived a tension, whereas Logan did not. Logan framed their self-disclosure as rich in breadth and depth, whereas Kiara perceived it to be open, but only to a certain extent: She would not broach certain topics because of their differences in status and social positioning. In this instance, Kiara chose to suppress her feelings, selecting her social positioning as an untenured junior faculty member and young mother over her role as mentee.

Effects of competing discursive styles on relational quality

RQ3 asked whether competing discursive strategies would have negative implications for relationship quality. Unfortunately (for this research project – fortunately, for my

participants), over half of the respondents did not experience any dialectical tensions related to diversity. Only three dyads had respondents who both reported dialectical tensions. In only two dyads did members identify the same tension. Although the number of dyads who experienced dialectical tensions is small, preliminary evidence suggests that competing discursive strategies may have negative implications for relationship quality. For example, Penny and Etta employed fundamentally different discursive strategies and their relationship was quite distant. Every reference that Etta made to Penny was in the past tense. Although Penny made reference to Etta in the present tense, the conversation was patently phatic: "Now when I see her, I say, 'Hi, Etta. How's it going? What's going on?' And I get very little, but at least I still get a smile. That's something." In contrast, the dyads who reported enacting similar strategies (in particular, open discussion), seemed to be much closer to one another. When asked about the level of emotional intimacy she shared with Fred, Wilma said, "It is not unusual for people to come by and see Fred kissing me on the cheek, kissing me on my hair, coming to give me a hug." Although Kiara and Logan may have different perceptions of what constitutes intimacy, Kiara describes their relationship as a friendship and Logan alludes to intimate conversations that they have had. Therefore, complementary discursive strategies may have a positive effect on relationship quality.

Discussion

Summary and interpretation

In sum, DMR dyad members alluded to a number of challenges related to differences in communication style or work ethic. Although three respondents noted a dialectical tension related to openness-closedness, the majority of respondents described tensions that pertained to judgment-acceptance. Dyads varied in terms of the extent to which they viewed dialectical tensions congruently. In the dyads where the mentee and mentor framed the dialectical tensions differently, they also responded to the tensions differently. In the dyads where the mentor and mentee identified the same tension, they chose similar discursive strategies. Preliminary evidence suggests that competing discursive strategies may have negative implications for relationship quality, whereas complementary discursive strategies may have positive implications for relationship quality.

As mentors discussed the ways in which they were similar to or different from their mentees, they identified demographic differences; then contrasted those differences with similarities in values or personality. This juxtaposition of similarity and difference places the two issues side-by-side in an effort to downplay differences by emphasizing similarities. This focus on similarity is reminiscent of Ortiz-Walters and Gilson's (2005) examination of the mentoring experiences of African, Hispanic, and Native American protégés in an academic setting. As the authors found, deep-level similarity (having a mentor or protégé who is perceived to share similar values) may be more important than surface-level similarity (having a mentor or protégé who is of a similar racial/ethnic background). Both protégés and mentors who perceived deep-level similarity reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction and interpersonal comfort than those who shared surface-level similarity.

Related to the emphasis on similarity is the phenomenon of color blindness. When Logan said that he did not see Kiara as an African-American, he was discursively constructing himself as a nonracist person. Ironically, as Simpson (2008) pointed out, "dismissing the difference in lived experience of White people and people of color as an irrelevant distinction upholds and affirms dominant ways of being, knowing, and doing" (p. 142). Given that the mentoring process is both paternalistic and political

(Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2004), mentors – especially White male mentors – need to set aside color blindness to:

> […] learn to see, accept, and experience their lives as raced and to explore the possibility that some of the good, ease, or rewards they have experienced have not been solely the result of hard work and just effort but of a system biased in their favor (Simpson, p. 155).

Although some respondents reported experiencing the dialectical tension of openness-closedness, most respondents described tensions related to judgment-acceptance. The prevalence of the judgment-acceptance dialectic (as opposed to other tensions such as autonomy-connection) may be because most of the mentors in this study were also supervisors. As Johnson (2007) noted, "A particularly prickly implication of supervising from a transformational perspective is the need to strike a delicate balance between advocacy and evaluation functions" (p. 265). This issue may be especially tricky when supervisor/mentors are members of the dominant group and mentees are URM group members. Because most judgment-acceptance tensions related to differences in communication style or work ethic, the supervisor-mentors' evaluations may have been influenced by cultural biases about what constitutes competence.

Practical implications

What are the implications of these findings for institutions of higher education? First, given that judgment-acceptance was the most frequently cited dialectical tension; moreover, that an inescapable tension exists between the supervisor's mentoring and evaluative roles (Johnson, 2007), universities and colleges might want to assign senior colleagues, rather than supervisors, to mentor new faculty and staff. Doing so may reduce the prevalence of judgment-acceptance tensions experienced by mentors and mentees. In addition, institutions of higher education may want to provide supervisors with sensitivity training to increase their awareness about the potential negative effect of cultural biases on perceptions of competence. Such training may enable supervisors who are dominant group members to provide more effective and unbiased evaluations of URM employees (Moody, 2004).

Second, the findings suggest that competing discursive strategies may have negative implications for relationship quality, whereas complementary discursive strategies may have positive implications for relationship quality. Given that open discussion was a discursive strategy employed by members of dyads with the highest levels of intimacy, institutions of higher education may want to incorporate strategies for encouraging open discussion into new mentor training. One possibility would be to develop a training module that would teach mentors and mentees how to engage in meta-communication about dialectical tensions that they may experience throughout the course of their relationship. Clutterbuck's diversity awareness ladder (as cited in Clutterbuck, 2012) or Stanley and Lincoln's (2005) lessons learned about cross-race mentoring relationships would provide heuristic frameworks for such training.

Third, Etta's experience is reminiscent of Allen's (2000) feminist standpoint analysis of organizational socialization, in which she describes instances in which Black female faculty are "invited" to serve as the diversity expert on countless committees, then denied tenure because their research record is inadequate. Allen describes avoidance and eventual organizational exit as responses to stressors and double-binds that black women face in the academy. The implications are clear: institutions of higher education that want to promote diversity need to recognize that faculty of color face several barriers to promotion and tenure, such as racism, tokenism, being overburdened with

and under-rewarded for diversity-related service, and lack of mentoring (Allen, 2000; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2004; Thompson, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 1999, 2011). Universities and colleges may want to educate European American supervisors, mentors, and senior colleagues about the barriers to advancement that URM faculty members face. This type of training may enable dominant group members to serve as more effective advocates for and evaluators of URM faculty members.

Limitations and implications for future research

This study is limited by its small and nonprobabilistic sample. Although I interviewed 22 URM faculty and staff, fewer than half of them were willing to give me permission to interview their mentors. Most of those who were unwilling to let me contact their mentors described their relationships as negative or dysfunctional, indicating that their mentors gave them poor advice or failed to offer them adequate support (Meyer and Warren-Gordon, 2013). Therefore, the DMRs that are described in this study are predominantly positive mentoring relationships. Although mentoring relationships have been identified as a source of positive social capital (Ragins, 2007) and positive emotional experiences (Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2011), critical scholars (e.g. Fineman, 2006) argue that focussing exclusively on positive relationships is culturally, ideologically, emotionally, and methodologically restrictive. Although logistically difficult, future research should attempt to focus on the dialectical tensions experienced by those in negative or dysfunctional mentoring relationships. Given that the extant research in this area (e.g. Eby *et al.*, 2000; Ragins *et al.*, 2000) is based on the experiences of protégés, future research should include both mentors' and protégés' perceptions about dialectical tensions in negative or dysfunctional mentoring relationships.

This study is also limited by its narrow analytic focus on race in DMRs. As one participant, Kana, noted, "Not everything that happens to me is about race. Sometimes it's about gender; sometimes it's about people just not liking me." As O'Neill (2002) suggested, future research should explore the effects of various dimensions of diversity on mentoring relationships. For example, DMR scholars could examine the relative effects of variables such as national origin, sex, class, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and personality on dialectical tensions experienced by mentors and protégés. In particular, DMR scholars might ask to what extent mentors and mentees emphasize certain dimensions of difference over others as they discursively construct their relationships.

Finally, this study is limited by its unique geographic location in the Midwestern USA. Although this context might appear to have limited generalizability to an international arena, one must recognize that generalizability is not the primary goal of qualitative research. Instead, the findings of this study offer lush descriptions, in-depth insight, and practical implications for faculty who are minority group members in predominantly white institutions around the globe. As Johannessen *et al.* (2012) noted, America's worldview regarding race may be similar to that of other countries whose histories also encompass slavery or colonization. As Phillips (2004) observed, up to half of black male British academics have sought employment in the USA because they have experienced indifference, marginalization, isolation, limited career prospects, and racism in British institutions. If international faculty members relocate to the USA, expecting these problems to go away, they may be unpleasantly surprised to learn that the issues are not unique to their countries of origin. Therefore, the findings of this study may serve as a cautionary tale for global citizens who plan to relocate to universities in the USA.

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