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## **Mothering and Mentoring**

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### **Exploring Relational Dynamics among Black Women in the Academy**

*Well documented are the existing realities, complex factors and implications of race and gender based marginalization of Black women. These occur within a range of societal contexts due to socially constructed ideas and actions that are perpetuated in several mediums and forums. The academic context is one such arena where Black women scholars often confront this pernicious cycle. This essay begins to explore the mentoring relationship between Black female academics in junior and senior positions, in order to investigate the role that mentorship plays in navigating the academic climate and demands that ultimately have bearing on the career path. Drawing from the established and influential framework of the Black mother–daughter relationship as a comparative lens, this chapter highlights pilot qualitative case studies and analysis that emerge from a body of extant research (Craddock, Mother to Mother). The essay examines levels of involvement, relational dynamics and messages of marginalization received between the junior colleague (daughter) and senior colleague (mother). Review of specific Models of Mother/Mentor Involvement are presented alongside their intersections with the relational nature of and marginalization messages transferred in these case sample dyads. Discussions of implications for leadership development, institutional equity, scholarly identity and furthering connections to other theoretical frameworks, such as Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) are noted. A call for deeper inquiry and broader exploration of the mother/mentor paradigm among Black women in the academy is encouraged.*

Socially constructed discourses, beliefs and practices about race, gender, class and power negatively impact Black women and has been documented by many scholars (Cole and Stewart 136; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 555;

Lawson 22). The marginalization of Black women within society reflects their membership in groups that are perceived as having less worth and being lower in status; this has an impact on their identity formation and opportunities for professional and personal advancement. Research documents the power of Black mother-daughter relationship as central to the way that Black women mediate and form identity in the midst of hegemonic forces that attempt to define them as subordinate. Awareness of this phenomenon, of course, does not dismiss or disregard the powerful importance of fathers' role or male influences, nor does it lock women into rigid assumptions of motherwork as an element assigned gender role. As many scholars note, mother figures play central roles in daughters' lives and especially in their understanding of intersecting identities of race and gender in a society where the identities of non-Whites and non-males are socially constructed as inferior (Bynum and Kotchick 530; Collins "Meaning of Motherhood"; Ceballo and Olsen 108; Wade-Gayles 9). In addition, writers have discussed models of relationship-based mentoring and interventions and have associated them with useful strategies of support and parenting within marginalized communities (Pinderhughes, Craddock, and Fermin 191)

Based on this salient framework of mothering and Black women, an analogy to the mentoring relationship between and among Black women is worthy of exploration. Especially within the academic context, the mothering/mentoring framework is an appropriate area to investigate relational dynamics, as Black female scholars often face marginalizing circumstances attached to their race and gender. Excavating patterns of relational dynamics among Black women in the academy offers opportunities to examine links to other relational theories that point to dynamics of race, gender and power such as Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Walker "How Relationships" 4). Key tenets of the RCT theoretical construct include engaging in authentic, growth-fostering relationships that are mutually empowering and take into consideration the socio-cultural context of the relationship (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons and Salazar 280). Such considerations of the role of relational dynamics in context further emphasize a relevant link between frames of mentorship and motherhood for Black women in higher education.

### **Black Women in the Academy and Mentorship**

Catherine Hansman suggests that there is a powerful role that mentoring plays for women as they develop their careers (63). Researchers have specifically noted the importance and challenges of mentoring for women in academia, with particular attention to women of color. Christy Chandler reports the strikingly low rates at which women of color are recruited into, and advance

in, higher education; these are glaringly evident in the fields of math, science and engineering. She points to the cyclical loop by which increasing the numbers of women of color faculty leads to higher rates of women of color completing doctoral programs (84-85). Often in isolating or hostile climates, female graduate students of color seek role models, mentors and a network of faculty and administrators of color in order to survive (Morgan 22; Reid and Wilson 100; Wheeler 96). Additionally, experimental researchers have delved into more nuanced challenges for women and minorities in academia by exploring faculty responses to doctoral students' request to meet. They found that Caucasian males received more and faster responses compared to women and doctoral students of color (Milkman, Akinola and Chugh 711). In the aforementioned studies, results showed that decisions about investing time to meet with students in the distant future activated more discrimination against women and minorities triggered by an increased reliance on stereotypes that privilege males and Whites (Milkman et al. 713, 716). Thus, the continuous process of attracting, fostering, and supporting the careers and needs of women of color in the academy, especially through mentorship, is necessary as a central vehicle for their recruitment, retention, and renewal.

For Black women faculty the stress associated with multiple layers of life as an academic, added to the isolation, vague tenure and promotion requirements, and high service commitments, also creates a great need for mentorship (Holmes et al. 109). As stated in the volume's Introduction, key data affirms the challenges described here: Black women make up only 2.7 percent of all faculty members (U.S. Dept. of Education).<sup>1</sup> Disproportionately high numbers of Black women hold joint or part-time appointments; meanwhile, they reach lower academic ranks, and are less likely to be tenured. Black women in the academy are often required to engage in specific service to represent and support diversity, but such tasks also bring costs. Tokenism can be a precursor of work overload, leaving less time for vital research (Evans and Cokley 54). The lower representation of Black women in higher education institutions has also been attributed to a "pipeline" problem. For example, Gina Evans and Kevin Cokely found that there was a direct connection between successful Black female mentors and development of a "pipeline" for future Black female academics (50). Specifically then, Black women in academia play a critical role through the mentoring of other Black women which has an individual impact on the professional development and career trajectory of Black female scholars, as well as an overall institutional impact on the numbers of Black women in higher education as indicated in the literature.

The aforementioned research highlights specific areas of mentorship, but also focuses on the level of involvement and relational dynamics as critical components of success in academia.

## Black Women and the Mothering Relationship

Parallel to the ideas above, two areas of the mother-daughter relationship provide particular insights into the mentoring relationship between Black women in junior and senior positions. The *levels of involvement* from the senior colleague (mother) to the junior colleague (daughter) and the *relational dynamics* between them are platforms that offer insights into such relationships in both the mothering and mentoring contexts.

Nancy Apfel and Victoria Seitz offered a conceptual model for mother-daughter relationships among Black adolescent mothers and their mothers. The researchers assessed the mothers' degree and mode of involvement in their caregiving of their grandchildren and to elaborate on the roles these women play in "their adolescent daughters' transition into parenthood" (Apfel and Seitz 422). Their research provides a broader understanding of the mother-daughter dyad in this context of exploring the mothers' level of involvement in their daughters' parenting practices. They found specific "adaptational approaches" among the pairs that were anchored in the mothers' level of involvement emerging from her own mothering practices and beliefs.

A later study (Craddock, *Mother to Mother*) built on this model of adaptive approaches using three lenses to examine qualitative case data to uncover the involvement of Black mothers in the lives of their parenting daughters. The lenses used were: (a) the caregiving practices of both the mother and the daughter; (b) approach belief statements, orientations, or actions of both daughter and mother; and (c) relational dynamics of the dyad that describe levels of intimacy (warmth, comfort, tension), autonomy (independence, dependence) and proximity (close, distant) captured in the interviews with daughters. Collectively these features formed the Model of Mother Involvement (MMI) by exploring caregiving practices, beliefs about how to approach parenting, and relational dynamics in the lives of the young Black mothers and their mothers (Craddock, *Mother to Mother* 38-39).

Following the qualitative methods of ethnographic data collection and analytic techniques (Miles and Huberman), a sample of ten African-American mothers was interviewed over a period of two and half years. Six to ten meetings occurred in the home or community of the mother who had elected to participate in an ethnographic sub-study of a larger home-visiting program evaluation. Interviews ranged from one to four hours in length. Each visit included in-depth observations, field notes and assessments to document mother-child/family interactions, home environment and activities. Informal conversation, naturalistic observation and semi-structured interviews to capture dimensions of parenting, help-seeking, family and program perspectives were also implemented, along with other protocols pertinent to the larger study

regarding program perceptions and race/gender socialization (Craddock, *Mother to Mother* 41-49).

To define the models of mother involvement, the relationships between the three elements of *practice*, *belief*, and *role relationship* were considered. From the data analysis four models were developed:

(1) *Instrumental*. In this model, what prevails is practical activity and a provisional outlook on involvement with the parenting teen; this represents the stewardship role that the mother takes on in her daughter's life. The mother provides general support and some guidance; the core belief is that the daughter is the primary caregiver and does most of the caregiving.

(2) *Complementary*. In this model, what are most evident are a daily functional practice and a shared approach to parenting; the mother takes on a partnership role with her daughter in raising the child. The core belief is that the mother and daughter are equal in a co-parenting role, sharing in the caregiving practices.

(3) *Surrogate*. In this model the mother is totally involved in the practices of caring for the child; the mother believes that she is the primary caregiver. The mother is seen as taking more of an ownership role as head of household and ultimately parent to both the daughter and her child. The caregiving practices vary somewhat, but the mother is still the lead.

(4) *Instructive*. In this model a teaching practice represents a developmental belief about becoming a parent: the mother is engaged in a mentorship role with her now parenting daughter. The core belief is that the daughter is learning to become a mother under the instruction of her own mother. Caregiving practices vary, with the daughter conducting most of them under some supervision.

### Exploring Mentoring through the Mothering Lens

Using the framework above to further examine these ideas of models of involvement and relational dynamics, a pilot qualitative case study (Craddock, *Mother-Mentor*) explored Black women's mentoring relationships in academia. An initial sample of ten Black women academics representing a range of higher education experience across the United States of America (i.e. research universities, teaching colleges, single sex institutions) were interviewed about their relationships with other Black women in senior positions while they were graduate students or junior faculty. Using interview protocols adapted from the Craddock (*Mother to Mother*) study, these women were interviewed for two to four hour blocks and asked to (a) reflect on the mentoring practices they experienced; (b) share specific messages they received from their senior colleague about issues related to race and gender marginalization as a Black female academic; and (c) to rate their relationship, in accordance with the aforementioned mother-daughter relational dynamic framework on *prox-*

*imity* (distant, median, close), *intimacy* (tense, neutral, warm) and *autonomy* (independent, consultant, dependent). Qualitative case study methodologies (Miles and Huberman; Mishler; Riessman) were used to collect and analyze interview data. Narrative data was clustered into themes and used the MMI as an analytical tool and guiding construct.

*Five models of mentorship emerged analogous to the MMI:*

(1) *Instrumental mentoring.* Practical activity and a provisional outlook on involvement prevail in this model. The junior member takes on the primary lead role in their academic program or career activity while the senior member takes on varying levels of very basic instrumental support.

(2) *Instructive mentoring.* Teaching practice represents the developmental approach used in this model. The senior member is engaged in a mentorship role with the junior member, offering purposeful guidance. Based on some level of consonance between junior and senior, the junior actively looks to and receives mentoring instruction and advice from the senior as the major lead for teaching and the junior is expected to carry it out.

(3) *Complementary mentoring.* Regular functional practice and a shared approach to the relationship and associated job related tasks are most evident in this model. The senior takes on a partnership role with the junior. The core belief is that the junior and senior are viewed as peers/colleagues. The senior does not take on a hierarchal role and she views her relationship with her junior colleague as complementary.

(4) *Surrogate mentoring.* In this model the senior colleague is involved in every area of the junior colleagues' tasks and professional development. The senior colleague fully identifies with the junior's struggles and virtually takes on, or fully vests herself in, the primary role in carrying out tasks or providing a lead role in the junior's academic career path.

(5) *No-involvement mentoring.* In this model the relationship is not substantive. The senior is not truly involved and she may be distant from or dismissive of the junior.

### **Case Briefs: Emergent Mentor/Mother Dyadic Themes among Black Women in the Academy**

A sub-sample of five of the pilot interviews were captured as case briefs for further interrogation and to more fully understand the overall model of mentor/mother involvement in the scenarios that the participants described. The following participant information offers a few key points about the junior colleagues academic placement and personal background at the time of their narrative reflections. This information provides additional grounding data useful

for future research questions (participant numbering coincides with cases):

*Participant 1* – reported on her experience as new faculty member in a rural college setting. She was part of a recruitment effort to attract more faculty of color to the school.

*Participant 2* – reported on her experience as an advanced doctoral student in an urban university. She was one of few African-American women who advanced from the Masters program into the Ph.D. program and had not withdrawn.

*Participant 3* – reported on her experience as a new faculty in an urban southern U.S. university. She had been a member of a national fellows program for doctoral students of color.

*Participant 4* – reported on her experience as a new science faculty at a small women's college. She was concerned about how she would be perceived and treated as a Black female scientist.

*Participant 5* – reported on her experience as new faculty in a large university setting. She was particularly enthused about joining a faculty where there was highly celebrated and recognized senior faculty.

### *Case Summaries*

Brief case overviews capture key elements of the senior and junior colleagues' relationship and the emerging mother/mentor model:

*Participant-Case 1.* In this case, only two women of color were teaching in the department. The senior colleague took no overt interest in the junior colleague and she neither articulated nor demonstrated any support. (*No involvement*)

*Participant-Case 2.* This case reflected a very involved faculty member (senior colleague) with a doctoral student (junior colleague). The faculty member actively engaged in a "maternal" stance, gave clear direct messages regarding marginalization in the university, and encouraged the student to combat them directly. The faculty member often stepped in to fight those battles for the student. (*Surrogate*)

*Participant-Case 3.* This case revealed an engaging mentorship where the senior faculty member exhibited a clear understanding of her role as mentor. The senior colleague guided and advised the junior faculty member who was expected to—and did—behave as an agent for herself while receiving detailed support from senior. (*Instructive*)

*Participant-Case 4.* In this case, the senior faculty member took on a basic mentorship role, based in pleasant personal exchanges and being available for basic information on department protocol. The junior raised questions about marginalization but the senior colleague did not focus on these issues as they arose; instead she suggested that it would be best for the junior colleague to focus energy on her own professional development and research. (*Instrumental*)

*Participant-Case 5.* In this case, the senior colleague was involved with and

responsive to the junior colleague, providing collegial support concerning her provisional needs as the junior colleague encountered and identified them. The aim of the senior colleague was to be supportive and encourage as needed, but not in an overly involved manner. (*Complementary*)

Case	Model of Mother/Mentor Involvement	Relational Dynamics: Proximity, Intimacy, Autonomy	Messages of Marginalization
1	No Involvement	Distant Tense Independent	No mention of marginalization as a career issue.
2	Surrogate	Close Warm Dependent	It is prevalent and you must be assertive in combating it.
3	Instructive	Median Warm Consultant	It can be covert and complex and you must be informed and strategic in dealing with it.
4	Instrumental	Median Warm Independent	It may happen but do not focus on it. Focus your energy on your own development.
5	Complementary	Close Warm Independent	It all depends. Just see what happens and I am here to listen if you want.

*Table 1: Mother Mentor Case Overview*

*The above table provides an overview of the Model of Involvement, Relational Dynamics and Messages of Marginalization conveyed by the junior colleagues regarding their relationships with their senior colleagues.*

As seen in Table 1, these selected cases from a sub-sample reveal the range and multiple layers of level of involvement, along with the underlying relational dynamics and messages about marginalization that emerge in senior/junior relationships among Black women in the academy. Case 1 exemplifies an isolating and competitive climate in which the Black senior faculty member showed self-protective and competitive behavior toward the junior, so the case was categorized as *No Involvement*. This is in stark contrast to the mother/mentor model in Case 2 where the senior faculty member actively positions

herself to protect and to develop the junior as a *Surrogate*. Surely the junior colleague's status as doctoral student lends itself to this more overtly maternalized approach, but other faculty-student relationships in the larger study (not reported here) reveal other mother/mentor models including *No-Involvement and Instrumental*. Case 5 provides yet another model in which the senior minimizes her hierarchical status and seeks a shared partnership with the junior in the *Complementary* mother/mentor model.

When the junior members interviewed for this study reflected on their relationships and their future outcomes, those in Case 3 (*Instructive*) and Case 5 (*Complementary*) found them to be the most adaptive professionally and the most satisfying personally. In Case 3, the junior colleague described appreciating the clarity with which her mentor understood the dynamics of their institution, engaged in strategic brainstorming with her, and then allowed her to implement a plan herself while also being available for ongoing guidance. She described acquiring skills that have been helpful in her career and also provided a "road map" about the kind of mentor she hopes to become herself. In Case 5, the junior faculty member appreciated the deep friendship that emerged from this partnership approach: the senior did not assume leadership or impose her thoughts or ideas onto the junior colleague. She explained that she was eventually able to define her own path in the institution and to cultivate a deep and trusted friendship with someone who may have otherwise felt too intimidating.

Although these two models of mentorship appear to offer the most adaptive and sustainable approaches among those in this study, it is important to remember that each approach is embedded in sociopolitical context. Thus one approach may be more appropriate or the only one possible given the institutional context and climate. This is most evident in Case 2: the senior faculty member took a firm and involved approach with the doctoral student, an approach driven by a particularly hostile environment. In this case, the doctoral student said she might not have made it through the program had it not been for this mentoring approach. She also reports that it left her somewhat cynical and perhaps ill equipped to deal with the hostility of academy in the future. Despite the retrospective nature of the data, the reported mentoring approaches and models that took into account the institutional context and the knowledge base of both senior colleague and junior colleague, and that value and incorporate *partnering* rather than hierarchy and *guidance frameworks* rather than didactic frameworks, seemed to have the greatest impact on the junior faculty members' professional development.

### **Intersections: Mother/Mentor Involvement, Relational Dynamics, and Messages about Marginalization**

Three salient domains provide a useful frame for exploring the relevance of and

intersections across levels of involvement, relational dynamics, and messages about marginalization among Black women in the academy: context, content and concept.

*Context* – Models of mother/mentor involvement provide a dyadic frame for exploring parallels between motherhood and mentorship among Black women in the academy. This contextual grounding presents a good opportunity to set the stage for better understanding relationships, race, and gender in academia.

*Content* – The relational dynamics that amplify intimacy, autonomy, and proximity allow us to excavate rich content that can aid in learning more about the nature of and connections between mentoring and mothering and the overarching role that marginalization may play in either fostering or hindering relationships among Black women in academia.

*Concept* – Investigating the perceptions, experiences, and messages related to marginalization that Black women experience in the academy can broaden and deepen a conceptual understanding of how racism and sexism emerge in the academy; in turn, this may lead to more fine-tuned strategies to combat and eliminate its prevalence in higher education.

### **Implications: The Mother/Mentor Paradigm**

As the current study is only a pilot, there are limitations to this case analysis given the small sub-sample of five and the numerous remaining aspects of the data to interrogate, such as across the intersecting salient domains noted above in context, content and concept. Future analysis will more deeply explore possible variations of the mother/mentor relationship among Black women in the academy, such as in single sex schools, Historically Black Colleges and Universities and across specific disciplines or departments.

The Mother/Mentor paradigm has great potential to provide insights into Black women's experiences in academia. For senior faculty, the mother/mentor role may provide a vehicle through which they can understand and affirm the marginalizing experiences they have faced themselves in the academy. In relationships with junior faculty or doctoral students, this mothering/mentoring positioning can potentially reveal elements of the unseen or unacknowledged hegemony of the political climate of the institution. That is, in the context of these mother/mentor relationships and constructs women can find ample opportunities to interrogating areas of potentially discriminatory treatment of Black women in academia that may otherwise be dismissed as personal issues. Also, the process of engagement between Black women may provide more opportunities for self-reflection, transparency, and acknowledgement of marginalizing experiences; this can bring to light areas of institutional inequity and pathways toward institutionalized improvement.

Moreover, the frame of the mother/mentor role may offer strategies and opportunities for cultivating leadership within a network of Black female academics and promote professional development across the institution. For example, seeking research funding that furthers the senior faculty member's work and provides a platform for junior faculty growth, or they may develop mission-aligned structures in the academy and meanwhile create sustainable vehicles that support existing and upcoming Black female academics. The mentors' messages regarding marginalization may also reveal knowledge of havens and hollow spots in the academy that could provide opportunities to both showcase strengths and highlight opportunities for growth for the senior faculty, junior faculty and perhaps even the institution itself.

Upon reviewing some areas of intersection between messages of marginalization and relational dynamics within Black female dyads in the context of the academy, once again the salience of the Relational-Cultural Theory is reinforced. The RCT theoretical construct is consistent with feminist, multicultural, and social justice theories and emphasizes that the context of relational development is invariably linked to individuals' cultural, racial, and social identities (Walker "How Relationships" 2). In the RCT framework, the essentiality of relationship-building translates into core mechanisms for empowerment that are particularly linked to those areas of one's identity that may have been historically linked to socially constructed ideologies of deficiency (Comstock et al. 283; Walker "Critical Thinking" 52). For Black women in the academy, locating and strengthening channels where they can cultivate their mutual relationships could promote both personal and professional development in a sector that has often left Black women isolated and devalued.

The concept of Black mothering in the academy, for which there is a growing body of literature and inquiry in its own right, coupled with the idea of mother/mentor models provides room for inquiry and expansion across many fields. Opportunities emerge for innovative research and practice to address Black motherhood, research that further delves into these mentoring relationships and pushes against the power paradigms as they become manifest among and between Black women. By pursuing these concepts, we may even be able to push back against some of the more frequently circulated public media portrayals of the Black mother/daughter relationship that too often reflect dysfunction marked by biting harshness or drastic neglect. By examining the emergent mothering/mentoring connections among Black women in the academy as outlined in the aforementioned pilot study, we can highlight the range and variety of mother/daughter or mentor/mentee relationships for Black women in ways that signal intellectual strength and leadership, domains where our general social discourse does not always include Black women.

Some key questions arise for future study. For example, how might we discuss and discern shared power, instructional power, and “power-over” in our relationships as Black women? How might we identify, embrace, and retain growth-fostering relational dynamics among Black female academics in settings that can perpetuate race and gender marginalization? How does a maternal identity as Black female scholars, practitioners and colleagues inform our professional and personal decisions? Considering these questions, and the many possible answers, reminds us of the role that mentors, like mothers, can play for Black women by potentially offering both “roots” and “wings”: a grounding in critical tools of information and instruction that can guide paths, while also aiding in developing the skills and opportunities necessary to fly and succeed as scholars and practitioners in academia.

*An earlier version of this essay appears in Laboring On: Testimony, Theory and Transgressions of Black Mothering in Academia (Demeter Press 2013).*

<sup>1</sup>Reference is based on research and statistics from the United States of America; however, patterns of marginalizing realities for Black women scholars in other academic institutions around the world also prevail.

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