

Culturally relevant mentoring is important

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I was born and raised in Vietnam and was the first in my family to go to university. Being an international student in the United States, I navigated the academic system on my own, and despite all the efforts (perhaps also due to not asking the “right” questions), I did not know I could pursue an academic career to conduct my own research. Later, after meeting my



mentor, I discovered this is where my passion lies. My mentor encouraged me to pursue a doctorate degree and, more importantly, he supported me in navigating academic spaces while remaining authentic to my cultural identity. Learning from this transformative experience, I try to model after his mentorship as I support Ph.D. and undergraduate students of my own.

I am sure I am not alone in my experience of benefiting from having a supportive mentor. Besides tangible career-related benefits, mentorship also provides psychosocial supports that build up the mentee’s self-esteem, sense of competence, and identity within the professional role that the mentee is being trained to take on ^{1,2}. In my case, my mentor also played an important role in helping me accept my identity as a Vietnamese woman and

understand my place within academic environments populated by individuals of backgrounds different from mine. In this article, I want to highlight the significance of such culturally aware mentorship; I believe it helps to promote a sense of belonging that is essential for the professional and personal growth of mentees from underrepresented backgrounds.

The term “culturally relevant pedagogy” has been used by anthropologists to advocate for education practices that focuses not only on measurable achievements but also helps students/mentees accept and affirm their social and/or cultural identity ³. This allows the mentee to build a sense of belonging in their field that does not require any compromising of their culture/identity ⁴. In my experience, my mentor and I had many conversations where both of us reflected upon how our backgrounds shaped our experiences in academia. Those conversations helped balance the unequal dynamic inherent in a mentor-mentee relationship; by talking openly about where we both came from, we established that there was no “right” or “dominant” perspective. Finally, they also nurtured trust ⁵, which is one of the essential components (if not the most important) of a successful mentorship. While not all mentees are initially open to discussing their backgrounds and the struggles that come with it, the mentor can facilitate such a process organically by being authentic about how their own background has shaped their academic identity. This communicates to the mentee that they are in a space where such conversations are welcomed and accepted.

Those conversations also allow the mentor to gain insights into struggles and challenges that come with the mentee’s social and/or cultural backgrounds, such as impostor syndrome, experiences of (institutional) discrimination, and microaggression, which can be common experiences for minorities in academia ⁶⁻⁸. Often, those highly salient, negative experiences can lead to heuristically driven behaviours or responses in times of stress or conflict that may not be readily understood by those without similar experiences. Being aware of such possibilities enables the mentor to react with empathy, validation, and acceptance, and

transition into helping the mentee navigate the stress/conflict. This does not require the mentor to engage with the events of the mentee's past; a lot of growth in academia requires that an individual does their own work to resolve those internal conflicts. But, having a mentor who is empathetic to one's personal struggles and who affords the space to process them makes the journey less isolating.

At times, conversations about social and cultural backgrounds can be emotionally taxing. For example, in "Mentoring in black and white: the intricacies of cross-cultural mentoring", one of the authors – a Black woman – shared her experience of having a white male mentor. The two of them had to work through the initial mistrust that she had toward her mentor due to the injustices that the white community perpetrated against the Black community throughout American history. If such tensions cannot be resolved, they can lead to resentment from the mentee and guilt on the part of the mentor. As such, the author recommended that an effective mentor-mentee dynamic requires continuing and honest discussions that account for social and/or cultural differences.⁵

It is important to keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all recipe to mentoring, and there will always be conflict and misunderstandings that require work from both the mentor and mentee to overcome. As mentors, it is our responsibility to cultivate a space that embraces each mentee's unique perspectives and cultural experiences. That starts with acknowledging and being honest about our own positionality, while remaining empathetic and willing to understand and validate the narratives that shape the mentee's multifaceted academic and personal identities.

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Competing interests

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