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Mentorship by and for Women of Color

Sitara Nath

PHL 499HA

4/30/19

Prelude

In the following paper, I will be situating my arguments within my experiences of navigating through my undergraduate career as a woman of color under the instruction of primarily white faculty members and advisors. The inspiration for this paper is based in the fact that up until my last semester as a four-year undergraduate student, I had never had a woman of color as a professor; however, late into my undergraduate career, I did find mentorship from a university staff member and woman of color who helped me realize that our shared non-dominant identities shaped our experiences in a very similar way.

This mentorship relationship proved to be particularly meaningful for me as I began to realize that having specific guidance from a mentor with experiential knowledge offered me an extra advantage that was limited with my white advisors. More specifically, I had been missing a deeper sense of solidarity with my mentors with regards to my lived experiences and intersectional challenges. This realization has provided the framework and inspiration for the arguments I will be outlining in this paper. Currently, my primary research interests in philosophy include race, gender, and intersectionality, subjects which I have studied under the guidance of Dr. Trout, my white female capstone advisor. In assessing these experiences side by side, I found a key distinction between the limitations of the mentorship that my white female professor could provide in comparison to the depth of understanding that my other mentor, a woman of color, could provide. These parallel experiences collectively provide the context and inspiration for my paper.

A. Breeze Harper Experience

One such experience that shaped the context of this paper took place when I was introduced to A. Breeze Harper, an African American female scholar, through Dr. Trout. In analyzing my experiences with Dr. Trout, I have seen that there is a limited extent to which her mentorship can provide me with insights about challenges that are specific to being a woman of color. These limitations often become most evident to me when I am navigating a complicated situation in which my intersectional identity affects how I am treated, viewed, addressed, or ignored in various interactions. I recall, for example, feeling extremely distressed by a discussion that criticized my leadership style within my role as the Student Body President at the University of Portland. The incident involved a conversation between two white males in which I was not present as I heard about the conversation after the fact. They specifically were discussing how my leadership style with other student leaders was too ‘hands off’ and I would argue that this is because I do not lead in the hierarchical manner that is integral to the Catholic governance of the University of Portland. During an individual meeting with one of these white men prior to their separate discussion, I was told that my predecessor, another white man, had taken headstrong stances on certain projects and that I, too, should be following that trajectory. As the first woman of color in the presidential role, I interpreted the deeper basis of this criticism to be rooted in how my intersectional identity breaks the mold of past leaders in a way that goes against the status quo of white male power. I was overwhelmed by stress, emotion, frustration, and unexplainable isolation. After expressing this to Dr. Trout, she played a videotaped conference on YouTube about white fragility led by A. Breeze Harper. Harper, as a woman of color and scholar of critical race feminism and the intersection of veganism and liberation for people of color, was

speaking at the 2016 Intersectional Justice Conference and discussing the concept of white fragility. I found myself deeply moved as she said:

I've rewritten this talk a million times - I've come a long way in the way I've presented these difficult subjects.... I was always nervous, was always scared, was always apologizing and this year, I'll be 40 and I've made the resolution to stop apologizing. And I've made a resolution to speak more from my heart and really understand the power of testimony and counter story-telling. (A. Breeze Harper, Uprooting White Fragility)

I started crying when she spoke because her vulnerable expression of feeling nervous and apologetic resonated with me in a way that was new and unfamiliar because I have not had enough women of color as mentors to express any kind of relation to that experience I, too, have been going through. At that exact moment, I remember actively realizing that I was looking at A. Breeze Harper on the screen behind Dr. Trout. Amidst feeling like I was connecting with Harper, I longed to share my struggles with her in person and to ask her about her journey of growth from being apologetic and scared as a woman of color, much as I was with the white administrators at the University of Portland. This powerful image of Dr. Trout being completely available for mentoring support while I still felt this need and longing for advice from A. Breeze Harper who was *unavailable* for me is indicative of what I am arguing in my paper - why having mentors who do not share non-dominant identities with women of color students limits coalition-building.

The limit to the coalition-building I was able to do with Dr. Trout, as a white woman, manifests in these questions: what would have happened if A. Breeze Harper was not on a screen but right in front of me? What could I have

asked her about her own experience in dealing with white, male molds that she is breaking in academia and in the world simply by virtue of being a woman of color? What advice could she have offered me *with personal understanding* that Dr. Trout cannot? Dr. Trout was able to affirm that my experiences were real and that I was not being over-sensitive to the situation. However, I would argue that if A. Breeze Harper had been a mentor available to me and if she had been present at that moment, she would have been able to give me the same affirmations *in addition to* advice on navigating my experiences based *on her own*.

Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that when students who are women of color research topics that relate to their non-dominant identities, mentorship from other women of color can allow for coalition-building, a coalition-building that is limited when the mentors do not share these non-dominant identities with their students. In what follows, I will first outline some general terminology that I will be using throughout my paper. The second part of my paper draws on philosophy scholarship to explain how I am generalizing the experiences of women of color to make my central argument in this paper and to justify how this generalization, based on non-dominant identities, can be made; at the same time, I will be acknowledging the space that exists in my paper for women of color of differing positionalities than my own to complicate the arguments I am making. I next outline the rationale I am using to break down my own experiences as a woman of color for white audiences in order to explain why my personal testimony is particularly important for demonstrating the limitations and depth of coalition-building that having a white mentor versus a woman of color mentor can provide, respectively. I then expand my argument into two central problems I have identified with mentorship for women of color who do

not have mentors with non-dominant identities: first, I will expand on the concept of white fragility as a limitation between white mentors and women of color students researching subjects relating to their non-dominant identities. I build this latter argument on sociological research to demonstrate how women of color students tend to experience less satisfying interactions in their research and with white mentors. The second problem I expand on is how the absence of a role-model who shares non-dominant identities with a woman of color student can adversely contribute to that student's sense of legitimacy in the field. Here, I will use my own experience with a white mentor and secondary woman of color advisor to further demonstrate this point. While pointing out these limitations, I also argue, on the other hand, that having women of color mentors allows for women of color students to have role models who do help build their own feelings of legitimacy. I expand on this by using personal experiences and scholarly research to demonstrate how women of color tend to rely on each other for support in challenging circumstances. I then discuss how non-dominant identities lead to shared personal and academic experiences that a mentor can support a student through. In the subsequent portion of the paper, I will argue that women of color tend to perceive academic advice from mentoring women of color as much more personally tailored to fit their needs, an understanding that contributes to stronger coalition-building. I then pose an expansive objection to this argument and respond to it. Lastly, I present my conclusion and identify gaps within this paper that future research could fill.

Terminology

In what follows, I will use several key terms that have been defined by scholars in various disciplines and will further supplement these definitions with personal applications. With regards to the term 'women of color', I will be

narrowly basing the term on women who do not have white skin. This term, as a result, is not based on ethnicity in that I do not consider, within this paper, a white-passing woman as a woman of color. In future research, I anticipate that this narrow definition could be expanded. I also will be using the term 'coalition-building' based on the definition put forth by Argentine philosopher and professor Maria Lugones in addition to my own. Lugones writes that "To the extent that Women of Color name a coalition, it is a coalition in formation against significant and complex odds that, though familiar, keep standing in our way. The coalition or interconnecting coalitions need to be conceptualize~ against the grain of these odds" (Lugones, 84). Additionally, a noteworthy distinction by Lugones, I would argue, offers clarifications on the importance of identification between women of color in coalition-building. Lugones writes that:

As resistant, we appear independent from each other to each other. The coalition sense of "Women of Color" necessitates this identification that comes from seeing ourselves and each other interrelating "worlds" of resistant meaning. To the extent that identification requires sameness, this coalition is impossible. So, the coalition requires that we conceive identification anew. The independence of women of color from each other performed by social fragmentation leaves us unwittingly colluding with the logic of oppression (Lugones, 85).

Based on my interpretation of Lugones, my definition of deep coalition-building as applied to women of color mentors and mentees involves women understanding each other in relation to respective worlds of resistance. I will be supplementing Lugones' description by using the term to convey a depth of solidarity between women of color that is achieved through similar life

experiences. Using my own experiences, I will also use the phrase 'coalition-building' to encompass the idea of sharing lived experiences versus simply validating and acknowledging them. Another central term I will be using is with regards to mentorship. Within this paper, I will specifically define 'mentorship' as the provision of guidance and insights to a student by someone who has had similar experiences or knowledge that can contribute to the student's development and success. While there are several different forms that mentorship can take on, it is beyond the scope of my paper to address all types of mentorship that occur in non-academic contexts. The last central term I will be using minimally is 'role-modeling' to convey a situation in which some kind of mentor or respected figure provides the pathway for someone to follow in their professional, personal, or academic footsteps.

Generalizing Experiences for Women of Color

The central argument of this paper is based on a generalized statement about how different mentoring relationships for women of color contribute to coalition-building; as such, my argument relies on a premise that broadly assumes elements of similarity in the experiences of women of color students with their mentors. As I am writing as a woman of color student, I understand that my experiences cannot be categorically the same for all other women of color as we have infinite, intersecting layers of oppression and privilege that differ among us. However, my argument on mentorship and the limits to coalition building for women of color with mentors who do not share non-dominant identities does broadly generalize the experiences women of color *tend* to have. In order to develop a scholarly basis for how I put forth a generalization for women of color in mentee roles while understanding our broad diversity of experiences, I rely heavily on the scholarship of Linda Alcoff, a philosophy

scholar specializing in feminism and epistemology. Alcoff writes that “We neither can nor should assume a similarity of experience, outlook, or perspective among those who share only a socially recognized identity category, and in fact to do so is to continue rather than ameliorate oppression” (Alcoff, 61). Alcoff introduces, however, the notion that “identities mark the backdrop for one’s outlook, and these backgrounds themselves can be usefully grouped” (Alcoff, 63). As such, in acknowledging that women of color have infinitely different experiences and dimensions to our non-dominant identities, I would also argue that using the broad grouping of women of color through our shared identity backdrop allows for ‘useful grouping’ in my argument advocating for why coalition-building is strengthened when women of color mentor other women of color students. Alcoff further writes that:

identities operate as horizons from which certain aspects or layers of reality can be made visible. In stratified societies, differently identified individuals do not always have the same access to points of view or perceptual planes of observation... This argument does not rely on a uniformity of opinion within an identity group but on a claim about what aspects of reality are accessible to an identity group... (Alcoff, 69)

Alcoff’s articulate argument lays the basis for the extent to which I am making generalizations about mentorship for women of color. With the assumption that women of color generally have access to aspects of reality in which social power differentials are at play with white mentors, I am arguing that there are limitations to coalition-building that are likely to occur given the generalized aspects of reality that women of color tend to witness. To support this claim within my own frame of knowledge, I want to situate it within my own

experiences as a woman of color seeking to build relationships and coalition with other young women of color. Many of the women of color who I surround myself with have differing positionalities with regards to their immigration status, ethnic background, sexual orientation, and other identity dimensions. I have found that when we are together, there are basic similarities in our struggles, including our experiences navigating relationships with white faculty members, friends, or family members who refuse to acknowledge our intersectional experiences. In this way, although we all have differing positionalities, I would argue that we also have, as Alcoff notes, access to very similar aspects of reality. This understanding, in turn, provides the basis for me to make arguments in this paper about generalized experiences for women of color when having white mentors rather than mentors who share their non-dominant identities. It is noteworthy to add that these common aspects of reality between women of color do not necessarily have to be grounded in shared experiences of oppression or struggle. In fact, I would actually argue that any tendency by either a mentee or mentor to connect with the other woman of color purely on the basis of being a product of oppression rather than on the basis of worlds of resistance undermines true coalition-building. This distinction is, in my argument, crucial to ensuring that shared experiences meaningfully contribute to building coalitions.

Scholarly Basis for Situating Research in Experiences and Positionality

In addition to clarifying how I have generalized the experiences of women of color for this paper, it is also relevant for me to situate myself and clarify my positionality. I am a first-generation United States of American citizen of Indian heritage. As such, I identify as a woman of color as well as a cisgendered individual. This clarification of my positionality is particularly relevant as I

situate several elements of my argument in this paper within my own experiences. Alcoff also informs why I have situated my research within the context of my own positionality and why I am offering my experiences as a tool for further arguing and explaining my central arguments. She writes that “Social identity matters because experience and perception matter for the possibility of knowledge. No individual is capable of knowing from every experiential location, and in our present culture, our social identities are in some cases relevant to our experiential locations” (Alcoff, 75). As such, noting my own positionality is relevant because I intend to offer several experiential tools in this paper to further my argument. Specifying my positionality, in turn, clarifies the experiential location from which I offer these tools.

I am also offering components of my experience in this paper with the assumption that white audiences will need to hear it in this manner in order to more fully comprehend the limitations that their mentorship can provide women of color. Because I am actually anticipating that the issue of white people not understanding these limitations to mentoring women of color may arise amongst white audiences or readers, I entertain an objection about that very subject within this paper. This method of utilizing and breaking down my own experiences is exactly what I argue is relevant to building my response to potential objections in such a way that white audiences can systematically understand them.

Along these lines of how personal testimony is relevant to my arguments, Linda Alcoff also powerfully and articulately states that “knowledge is dependent on subjectivity, identity, and experience, at least in some important cases... knowledge cannot be completely disentangled from social location and experience [and] the pretension to abstraction only conceals the relevant context, disabling a productive dialogue between contexts” (Alcoff, 65). In this way, as

a woman of color, I believe that situating my research within my experiences and positionality will allow for my generalizations to be contextualized and will create the opportunity and invitation for dialogue with other women of color. More specifically, noting that my perspective is not representative of all women of color while also clarifying that I speak and write as a woman of color of Indian heritage and born in the United States, I argue, is an indication that there is space for women of color with different dimensions to their identity to enrich my arguments with their own narratives and experiences.

Problem 1: White Fragility

Based on my research, I would argue that there are multiple ways in which coalition-building can be limited when women of color are studying subjects related to their non-dominant identities under the advisement of a mentor who does not share these non-dominant identities. The first problem I have identified as a limitation between women of color students and white mentors is the issue of white fragility. Robin DiAngelo, a white fragility scholar, writes that white fragility is the product of the “insulated environment of racial privilege [which] builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress” (DiAngelo, 55). I argue that DiAngelo’s work offers a legitimate explanation as to why women of color tend to generally receive less respect from primary advisors, a point argued and researched by sociologists and professors Shiri Noy and Rashawn Ray. Noy, a woman of color scholar, and Ray, an African-American scholar, focus on systematic disadvantages in graduate school mentorship and write that ““Within the social sciences and humanities, women of color report having less respectful primary advisors compared with white men, white women, and men of color. The odds of believing one’s primary advisor treats one’s ideas with respect are 42% lower

for women of color as compared with white men” (Noy and Ray, 898). Noy and Ray expand on their analysis by arguing that:

Women of color in graduate school may perceive, interpret, and be subjected to less than satisfying interactions with faculty in the classroom, during one-on-one meetings, and in the quality and content of responses on their writing. These unsatisfying interactions between women of color and faculty members may surface in responses about respect in this study. These problematic interactions may lead to women of color being less likely to trust their advisors and listen to their advice. (Noy and Ray, 903)

Based on my definition, coalition-building involves deep solidarity cultivated through similar experiences against shared odds. Using Noy and Ray’s points, I would argue that when a woman of color student perceives a lack of respect from an advisor who does not share her same non-dominant identities, the resulting weakened trust undermines and poses a limitation to coalition-building.

To tie this back to white fragility, I would argue that the explanation for *why* women of color tend to receive less support from advisors who do not share non-dominant identities is based in white fragility exhibited by the advisors themselves. I would further argue that non-dominant identity research by women of color can lead white people to experience racial discomfort having not had to build tolerance for it. This racial discomfort can be reflected in the weaker respect and support offered by white mentors to women of color students. DiAngelo’s concept of the insulated environment of racial privilege offers an insight into why women of color can have lessened respect from white mentors when doing research related to their non-dominant identities; specifically, white

mentors are more likely to have an environmentally reduced tolerance for racial stress. To strengthen this argument, I draw on DiAngelo's research because she writes that:

In the dominant position, whites are almost always racially comfortable and thus have developed unchallenged expectations to remain so. Whites have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort and thus when racial discomfort arises, whites typically respond as if something is 'wrong,'... This blame results in a socially-sanctioned array of counter-moved against the perceived source of the discomfort, including: penalization; retaliation; isolation; ostracization; and refusal to continue engagement... This insistence also functions to punish those who break white codes of comfort. (DiAngelo, 60-61)

Using DiAngelo's assertions here, I would argue that when women of color research subjects relating to their non-dominant identities, particularly their non-dominant races, they are likely to face this kind of disengagement from white mentors. When a woman of color researching non-dominant racial identities, she is inherently working with subject matter that can induce racial discomfort with white mentors.

In order to explain how white fragility specifically undermines coalition-building between white people mentoring women of color students, I would argue that it is especially relevant for me to contribute my own personal experiences with white fragility among peers. My continual experiences with white fragility have led me to become deeply familiarized with breaking down my experiences as a woman of color into digestible, non-negotiable components for white people. I have been raised in and attend a university environment that

is predominantly white and thus, have been shaped to break down experiences constantly. In doing so, I have found that my non-dominant experiences are particularly helpful tools for white people to understand their own fragile and instinctive tendencies to dismiss my struggles. For instance, I style the breakdown of my experiences as though it were a cross-examination in that I frequently experience white peers doubting the validity of any points I make about race, gender, intersectionality, or the targeting of women of color. I use this method in order to guide white peers through my experience and to walk them through any tendency they may have to dismiss my concerns about intersectional issues without weighing their own bias or the evidence I am offering. I practice breaking down my experiences, for instance, by asking questions and making statements in such an obviously agreeable way that my white counterparties have no choice but to acknowledge that they may be instinctively denying the racism I am experiencing.

For example, I recently used the following set of questions and statements to explain my struggles, particularly relatively subtle microaggressions, with the white administrators at the University of Portland to a white peer. Although she had not actually witnessed any of the interactions between myself and the white man I was interacting with, I would argue that she quickly expressed fragility in her immediate skepticism about whether race was involved in his condescending treatment of me. I systematically employed the following line of logical questions with her:

1. "You are saying that race could not have been a factor that influenced how this white man treated me."
2. "You did not witness the interaction I had with the white man?"
3. "Because you did not witness this interaction, you do not know if his tone of voice was dismissive or not?"

4. "Because you did not witness the interaction, you do not know whether his body language was threatening or dismissive."
5. "So, without being present, without seeing what happened, without hearing what was said or how it was communicated, you are saying *you know* that racial bias could not have been involved in the way the white male administrator treated me?"

Such questions uproot the evident and fragile disconnect I have often seen amongst white people between their preconceived notions of intersectional issues and the realities people of color and specifically, women of color, experience.

This experience strongly connects to DiAngelo's point about racial stress-induced sanctions by white people against people of color when experiencing racial discomfort. I argue that tactics such as the line of questioning detailed above are substantially more difficult to use in a mentorship relationship between a woman of color and white mentor; this is especially the case when the mentor has grading power or institutional backing as a professor and, as a result, has even more sanctioning power should they experience racial stress with a woman of color student. For a woman of color to address white fragility exhibited by a white mentor as I have done with my peers can be much riskier. My overall argument maintains that when a woman of color student is researching her non-dominant identities, a white mentor is highly likely to exhibit white fragility which can translate into less support for and disengagement with the work of that woman of color. Because of the unequal power in an academic mentoring relationship, a woman of color is unlikely to be in a safe position to address any kind of white fragility exhibited by her mentor without running the risk of academic or personal sanctions from the mentor. Given that coalition-building requires a sense of deep understanding and respect

for different worlds of resistance, white fragility limits coalition-building between women of color and white mentors greatly.

Using DiAngelo's work, I would argue that white fragility also limits coalition building between white mentors with women of color students because their experiences are more likely to be seen as outside the normalized white perspective. DiAngelo writes that:

Whites are taught to see their perspectives as objective and representative of reality (cite sources within sources). The belief in objectivity, coupled with positioning white people as outside culture (and thus the norm for humanity), allows whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience...a universal reference point is assumed... Within this construction, whites can represent humanity, while people of color... can only represent their own racialized experiences. (DiAngelo, 59)

If white perspectives are seen as representative of a universal reality as I interpret DiAngelo to be saying, I would further argue that coalition-building is limited between women of color and white mentors because research and experience related to non-dominant identities is already more likely to be viewed as outside of the white standard and white representation of humanity. Patricia Williams, an African-American legal scholar, contributes greatly to my argument here. She writes about an "essentialized worldview... a worrisome tendency to disparage anything that is nontranscendent (temporal, historical), or contextual (socially constructed), or nonuniversal (specific) as 'emotional', 'literary', 'personal', or just Not True" (Williams, 9). I would argue that there is a connection between Williams' discussion on essentialized world views and

DiAngelo's expansion on the white, objective representation of humanity. As such, if a woman of color student is academically exploring her non-dominant identities, the products of her labor could be classified as 'Not True' as Williams' puts it, because they are outside the mold of essentialized white world views. If a woman of color's experiences is seen by a white mentor as somehow less than the universalized white reference point, I would argue that the solidarity and sense of understanding that is integral to coalition-building is limited and inhibited

Problem 2: Lack of Role-Modeling

The second problem I have identified as a limitation to coalition-building between women of color and mentors who do not share their non-dominant identities is the absence of role-modeling along non-dominant identity lines. I would argue that when a woman of color has a mentor who does not share non-dominant identities, a key limitation to coalition-building emerges through the way role-modeling and a student's subsequent feelings of legitimacy in scholarly work are detrimentally affected. My interpretation of gender studies professor Wendy J. Robbins' research provides further support for my argument. In particular, Robbins' summary of feminist philosopher Christine Overall's self-described academic experiences portray "her search for professional identity and legitimacy in a heavily male-dominated humanities discipline. As an undergraduate, Overall is not taught by a single woman and has no same-sex role models" (Robbins, 7). I interpret Overall's experiences, as summarized by Robbins, to mean that the absence of female faculty in her humanities work adversely contributed to her sense of legitimacy in her field. More broadly, my understanding of Robbins' description shows that when a woman of color does not have a mentor who shares similar non-dominant identities, her feelings of

legitimacy can be weakened as well. I would argue that as Robbins conveys this point on the basis of gender, it also applies to race. Specifically, I would argue that Robbins' description could apply to women of color who do not have role models who share their non-dominant identities. To further this argument, I would also note that the subsequent challenges to Overall's feelings of legitimacy in the humanities can also map onto the experiences of women of color who lack advisors sharing their non-dominant identities. These struggles for individual legitimacy that a woman of color student can face limit coalition-building because they can inhibit women of color from identifying the odds we are collectively facing as coalition-building, in my definition, is intended to do.

The lack of role-modeling that occurs when an advisor does not share non-dominant identities with women of color mentees demonstrates other key limitations to coalition-building. I interpret the work of white scholars Cosette Grant, a professor with scholarship focused on mentoring and educational foundations, and Sarah Ghee, a sociologist, as evidence to support this argument. Ghee and Grant point out that "A major advantage of same gender mentoring is the powerful role-modeling that women in hierarchical positions can provide for protégés. Just as gender intricately influences mentoring relationships, race/ethnicity, and culture further inspire mentoring. Much of the research indicates that mentoring relationships, therefore, tend to develop along same race lines" (Ghee and Grant, 768-769). Using my understanding of Grant and Ghee's work, I would argue that a much more nuanced relationship can develop when a mentor shares non-dominant identities with a woman of color mentee relative to when the mentor does not have those identities.

This is another opportunity within my paper where I see a space to offer my experiences as a learning tool to further explain Grant and Ghee's point. My secondary advisor who is a woman of color is currently pursuing graduate

school opportunities and has pursued several other educational opportunities at relatively prominent institutions. Up until I had met her, I was subconsciously convinced that I was not capable or qualified for any kind of higher-level educational pursuits in that I had never considered my own potential for such endeavors. By having a secondary advisor who is a woman of color, I have been able to build coalition with my advisor in a powerful way because we can share experiences against common challenges. During one of my conversations with my secondary advisor, I asked her about she navigated her own academic goals in relation any plans to have biological children. She responded by posing a question “Where do I want to be in five years: married with children or defending my dissertation?” Hearing her say these words drove me to tears in very much the same way that A. Breeze Harper did. I felt and admired the profound impact of imagining her defending her dissertation and achieving a role that I have not seen enough women of color in. Given her impressive list of educational institutions, I then asked her the question I always struggle with in relation to my own perception of my capacities and strengths “How do you know whether you are *worthy* of applying to these higher education institutions?” We discussed our shared struggles with assessing our self-worth and capabilities and I felt incredibly relieved to hear that we had the same concerns. Having *her* tell me that I had the qualities and skills to pursue higher education was a moment of deep coalition-building between us because she had faced similar issues that I was anticipating and had still succeeded. In this way, my sense of legitimacy in the goals I have for myself was strengthened through the presence of a woman of color mentor who presented herself as a role model whose general path I now believe I am capable of following. In this way, having a mentor who shared non-dominant identities with me as a woman of color

positively contributed to my confidence and legitimacy as an undergraduate scholar.

To make this distinction between mentors with different identities clearer, it is relevant for me to include a key experience I have had in my mentoring relationship with Dr. Trout. For example, I find that whenever I describe some unique or complex challenge which I am struggling with in relation to being a woman of color, I constantly ask Dr. Trout “Does that make sense?”. On several occasions, I share various aspects of my experiences as a woman of color that are incredibly complex, including moments when I have been ignored in my leadership context while people look to white men in my surroundings to make decisions that I am responsible for. In sharing these sorts of moments with Dr. Trout, I constantly ask her if I am making sense and she *always* affirms that I am. Regardless, Patricia Williams’ scholarship also plays into this concern as she writes of her own experience “I don’t expect courtesy, I value it in a way that resembles love and trust and shelter...I know that this valuing is a form of fear. I am afraid of being alien...” (Williams, 129). I find Williams’ work to be particularly relevant in explaining the concern I have for coming across as nonsensical, confused, or even overly sensitive when describing any kind of challenges I experience with my intersectional identity.

When working with my mentor who is a woman of color, on the other hand, this fear is diminished because there is no experiential gap that causes me any concern of coming across as nonsensical. I find myself asking this question of “Does this make sense?” substantially less when I am describing any struggles I have in relation to being a woman of color. When I discuss these challenges, I do not generally have to ask my secondary advisor if what I am saying makes sense because she is often contributing back to the conversation by noting that she understands what I am saying *on a personal level through lived experience*. As

mentioned earlier, I am very familiar with having to break down my experiences in order for white audiences to understand me whereas I personally find that with my secondary advisor, I do not have to make this extra effort.

Based on my research, I found additional scholarly evidence to corroborate this experience more broadly with the testimonials from other women of color. The work of Dr. Cyndi Snyder, a medical professor and specialist in education policy, demonstrates this she interviews doctoral candidates who are women of color in South Africa to assess how they navigate higher education. Snyder specifically writes that:

Regarding support, the interviewees often noted they turned to friends, peers, and family as sources of support and encouragement. While finding time to work with peers proved difficult in some circumstances due to time constraints and other obligations, interviewees also noted that spending time formally and informally with peers in their programmes helped them find common ground, knowing that others were facing similar situations and had similar feelings, and encouraged them to persevere. (Snyder, 29)

I would argue that Snyder's work, while focusing on peer relationships rather than exclusively mentor relationships, reveals that women of color tend to rely on the support of other women of color due to the similarity of personal experiences as I found with my woman of color advisor. I would argue, then, that the support derived from such similar experiences between peers can also be cultivated when mentors with the same non-dominant identities as other women of color share common lived experiences, thereby contributing to deep coalition-building. As a result, I would argue that while I find my interactions with Dr.

Trout incredibly affirming, I also find that my fear of coming across as alien to her limits our ability to engage in coalition-building because coalition-building necessarily requires deep understanding from all sides.

In furthering my argument, I would also note that students who are women of color may perceive that mentors with their non-dominant identities can provide better insights into navigating academic obstacles that generally are, I would argue, exclusively facing women of color. I would further argue that when a woman of color perceives that a mentor has a strong understanding of what personalized advice is needed, a rich coalition-building process can take place. To support this argument, I draw on my interpretation of the anecdotal research conducted by Dr. Suhanthie Motha, an English and Language Pedagogy specialist, as well as Dr. Manka Varghese, a linguistics and education professor. Motha and Varghese write that, from the perspectives of women of color, “We often have heavier mentorship and graduate student loads because we attract and are more likely to feel responsible for students who look like us. We are sought out by racial minority, linguistic minority, and female students, who often need more time-consuming care because they are frequently less familiar with the conventions of academia and bring less cultural capital” (Motha and Varghese, 511). I interpret Motha and Varghese’s research to suggest that students who are women of color, having been unrepresented in Western/Global North academia, tend to look for navigation support from mentors who are also women of color and who likely have more in-depth knowledge of their obstacles. I also draw again on the work of sociologists Noy and Ray who point out that “Unlike primary advisor support, women of color across all disciplines report having more supportive secondary advisors. One plausible explanation for this finding is that women of color may seek out minority and/or female faculty who they believe will recognize, understand, and appreciate their raced/gendered

academic and personal struggles” (Noy and Ray 903). I would argue, based on Mothie and Varghese’s research, supplemented by Noy and Ray’s explanation, that students who are women of color generally turn to other advisors with similar non-dominant identities based on their perception that their unique academic experiences will be better understood. I would also argue that this general perception and belief of understanding lends itself to women of color being more open to coalition-building with one another as it involves deep solidarity cultivated through similar life experiences against common barriers, I would argue that when advisors and mentees share non-dominant identities, the advisor can provide academic advice that is finely catered to the needs of women of color which, in turn, allows for a coalition-building that is otherwise limited.

Someone might object to this argument by maintaining that this tendency for women of color to perceive more academic support from mentors with similar non-dominant identities is based on a projected perception of solidarity. To situate this argument within my own experience, I have actually heard some variant of this objection several times. As part of this objection, someone might note that advisors who do not share non-dominant identities with students who are women of color would still be able to provide the same academic insights and navigation support. This argument also might note that women of color, without justified grounding, assume that mentors with similar non-dominant identities will be able to cater academic advice to their unique needs by virtue of their shared identities alone. The subsequent coalition-building, therefore, cannot be a guaranteed outcome of mentors sharing non-dominant identities with their students because it is possible that shared non-dominant identities alone will not be sufficient to contribute to the process.

In responding to this objection, I would first concede that simply sharing non-dominant identities alone is not necessarily sufficient to guarantee coalition-building will occur between women of color in a mentoring relationship. It is entirely possible that, against the distinction made by Lugones, women of color may be “colluding with the logic of oppression” (Lugones, 85). However, I would still maintain my argument that when women of color have mentors with similar non-dominant identities, there is a deeper understanding of lived experiences and shared obstacles that cannot be understood to the fullest extent if the mentor does not belong to those non-dominant groups. In Snyder’s research, there are several research studies that demonstrate this as she writes that:

effective mentoring for women of colour in doctoral programmes may need to look different from traditional notions of mentoring often grounded in White, malecentric frameworks (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013; Harris, 1999). For example, a study of Black women in educational leadership programmes found that interviewees expressed the importance of having a mentor of the same race and gender, who goes beyond the traditional notions of mentoring by providing a culturally relevant and nurturing peer-mentor role. (Grant, 2012; Grant & Simmons, 2008) (Snyder, 17).

Based on Snyder’s work and assessment of pre-existing literature, I would argue that sharing non-dominant identities allows a mentor to go beyond the traditional advising role and constraints. Given that a unique intersection of race and gender allows a mentor to do this with a woman of color, I would argue

against the objection and maintain that advisors who are not part of similar non-dominant groups cannot provide the same finely catered mentorship.

Lastly, I would address the objection by noting that the tendency of women of color to perceive that their mentors in non-dominant groups understand their unique needs is a justified, evidence-based assumption. I would argue that the fieldwork and research of Nwando Achebe, a prominent Nigerian historian and woman of color, supports this notion as she expands on the role of her positionality in empowering women to tell their stories as part of her research. Achebe writes “In the course of my fieldwork travels, I negotiated my multiple identities as daughter and wife in a space between different Igbo communities, as well as privileged Igbo woman within Nigeria and academic communities in the United States, to my advantage, and these identities, to a large extent, determined how I was perceived and received in given research communities” (Achebe, 26). Through my understanding of Achebe, I would argue that she is suggesting that various identities are at play in different spaces, all of which contribute to the perception her research communities had of her. Achebe specifically adds that “My assumed positionality often helped to make me appear more accessible to my collaborators” (Achebe, 20). In this excerpt, I understand Achebe to be saying that her positionality influenced her perceived accessibility which, I would argue, directly counters the assertion that women of color look to mentors of the same non-dominant groups without justification. While Achebe is referring to how her positionality affected how she was perceived in her research, likewise, I would argue that a mentor’s positionality can affect the extent to which women of color perceive they are more of a resource than other advisors. As such, I would further argue that this perception is not arbitrary but rather, justified because it is grounded in the idea that similar

lived experiences and positionality do contribute the connection women of color have with each other.

Conclusion

Based on my personal experiences, the main focus of this paper was shaped to analyze how coalition-building is limited when women of color, researching topics related to their non-dominant identities, have mentors who do not share non-dominant identities. At the same time, I was arguing that mentorship from women of color for students who are women of color, can allow for coalition-building. Within this paper, I first developed a scholarly and argumentative basis for positioning this paper within my experiences and for generalizing the experiences of women of color in order to make a broad but useful argument. I then addressed two central problems that pose as limitations to coalition-building when women of color do not have mentors who share non-dominant identities, the first being white fragility. White fragility, I have argued, can adversely affect coalition-building by inducing racial stress in white mentors who can, in turn, respect or support the research of women of color less. I addressed this by drawing on anecdotal and interdisciplinary sources of research which demonstrate a disproportional lack of support for women of color students. I also argued that because white fragility is the result of a white, seemingly objective representation of humanity, any research into non-dominant identities by a woman of color is likely to be viewed outside this objective representation and is also likely to induce a white-fragile response or sanction. Collectively, I finally concluded, these contribute to the way white fragility limits coalition-building between a woman of color student and white mentor. The second limitation I identified was how the absence of role models along non-dominant identity lines adversely contributes to a woman of color's legitimacy as

a scholar and student in her field. At the same time, to show that coalition-building can be strengthened for women of color through having advisors who are women of color, I drew from research that shows not only how similar experiences provide the mentor with the insights to guide other women of color, but also how students who are women of color tend to perceive mentors as having the necessary catered academic insights to help them navigate through academia. I anticipate that this project will be provide the foundation for future research into other nuanced ways in which mentorship by and for women of color allows for coalition-building. One of the gaps within this paper was that it grouped the experiences of students who are women of color together and I hope that future research will focus on specific and unique challenges that various sub-groups of women of color face.

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