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To cite this article: Talia Esnard, Deirdre Cobb-Roberts, Vonzell Agosto, Zorka Karanxha, Makini Beck, Ke Wu & Ann Unterreiner (2015) Productive Tensions in a Cross-Cultural Peer Mentoring Women's Network: A Social Capital Perspective, *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 23:1, 19-36, DOI: [10.1080/13611267.2015.1011035](https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2015.1011035)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2015.1011035>



Published online: 23 Feb 2015.



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Productive Tensions in a Cross-Cultural Peer Mentoring Women's Network: A Social Capital Perspective

Talia Esnard
University of Trinidad and Tobago

Deirdre Cobb-Roberts, Vonzell Agosto and Zorka Karanxha
University of South Florida

Makini Beck
Rochester Institute of Technology

Ke Wu
University of Montana

Ann Unterreiner
Mesa, Arizona

A growing body of researchers documents the unique barriers women face in their academic career progression and the significance of mentoring networks for advancement of their academic trajectories as faculty. However, few researchers explore the embedded tensions and conflicts in the social processes and relations of mentoring networks, and the implications this has for social capital. Using this as our starting point, our narrative reflections suggest that while productive orientations and shared experiences as women faculty of color promote supportive professional roles; the structural, relational, and cultural dynamics subtly frame the basis of our tensions. In moving beyond these, we advance the need for structured and constructive engagement of our differences in building the social capital of peer mentoring networks. While this is not an easy task, we hold that it requires fluid and ongoing negotiations of these relationships if collective goals are to be realized.

Keywords: cross-cultural, peer mentoring, productive tensions, social capital

Introduction

There is little contention about the significance of mentoring networks to the academic trajectories of women of color who try to rise above the double bind of race and gender (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Davis, Chaney, Edwards, Thompson-Rogers, &

Talia Esnard, Center for Education, University of Trinidad and Tobago; Deirdre Cobb-Roberts, Department of Psychological and Social Foundations, University of South Florida; Vonzell Agosto, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education, University of South Florida; Zorka Karanxha, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education, University of South Florida; Makini Beck, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, USA; Ke Wu, Department of Mathematical Science, University of Montana; Ann Unterreiner, Research Consultant, Mesa, Arizona.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Talia Esnard, Center for Education, University of Trinidad and Tobago, Old Graver Road, Southern Main Road, Valsayn Campus, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies. E-mail: talia.esnard@utt.edu.tt

Gines, 2012; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). The general consensus is that mentoring networks serve as important support structures and critical spaces within which women of color can navigate the potentially crippling intersection of race and gender while surfacing as thriving academics (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007; Tillman, 2011). There, the overwhelming emphasis is on the building of trust, commitment to the collective goals (Wang, 2009), the provision of social support, as well as, sharing of information and resources as critical aspects of social capital (Alfred & Nanton, 2009; Wang, 2009). What stands out therefore is a metaphor of advantage (Burt, 2000) that is cemented in social capital discussions about the professional prospects and achievements of women faculty in general (Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007).

However, what emerges from such a discourse are somewhat romanticized notions of social networks, its inherent processes, and the outcomes derived therein (Esnard-Flavius & Aziz, 2011). In so doing, the discomforts that surface from group diversity, exclusivity, and inefficiencies are often left unaddressed (Dasgupta, 2005; Portes, 1998). What remains lacking in such research contexts therefore are ongoing interrogations of social capital that challenge idealistic assumptions of opportunities, collectivity, diversity, and solidarity (Lin, 2001; Woolcock, 2000) and also capture the intricacies of social interactions, social action, and capital formation (Gajjala, 2001; Lin, 2001) particularly within informal cross-cultural peer mentoring networks that are increasing materializing as professional alternatives for women faculty of color (Jean-Marie & Brooks, 2011; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007).

In moving beyond such an inherent limitation in the discourse of cross-cultural peer mentoring for women of color, we contend that this requires more holistic, theoretical explorations, and applications of social capital theory that further problematizes the ways in which embedded social structures, social processes, conditions of social engagement and relations, shape the connections, social opportunities and its inherent contexts, conflicts and tensions, as complex outcomes of cross-cultural peer mentoring networks among women of color. The purposes of our article were therefore to (a) engage in a critical self-examination of the processes and structures of our peer mentoring network that shape the patterns of relationships, sources of convergence and divergence therein, and productive outcomes, (b) discuss how these structures and processes introduce spaces of support and tensions that can inhibit and/or facilitate the collective goals of the group and (c) to make a case for the ways in which these intricacies can be negotiated. Our hope is that such a discourse with its reflection on social structures and processes of informal peer mentoring networks can provide deeper insights into the complex yet potentially productive dynamics of collaboration among women faculty of color and the implications of these for returns of social capital formation and continuance.

Our Cross-Cultural Peer Mentoring Network

We are seven cross-cultural women (Afro-Caribbean-[2], Asian [Chinese], Caucasian, African American, Latina, Montenegrin) of various academic ranks, from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, who work and live in different academic spaces across the United States and in the Caribbean. We define ourselves as women of color and/or cross-cultural allies working within the academy, and as professional collaborators with the capacity to serve as peer mentors within a multicultural group of women who support each other across boundaries and borders (Agosto et al., *in press*).

We are also part of an academic collaboration between two larger peer mentoring networks of women faculty, those being, Caribbean Educators Research Initiative (CURVE) and Researchers in Education, Network, and Dialogue (FRiENDS) which was initiated in 2011. As a subset of CURVE-y-FRiENDS or C-y-F as we affectionately call it, we, the multicultural members, were charged in 2012 with the need for more productive discussions, exchanges, and collaborations with other cross-cultural associates in the network that confront issues of diversity for women of color in academia. To do this, we often communicated via Skype, telephone and email, to center issues of diversity for women of color who enter the professoriate, through our collaborative involvement in the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the conversion of our conference paper to a published manuscript.

While it may be somewhat premature to assess the achievements of this multicultural group given its recent formation, we have been able over the past two years to present on these issues at two AERA conferences (2013, 2014) and to celebrate our forthcoming publication; *Like Running Bamboo: A Mentoring Network of Women Intending to Thrive in Academia*. In that first paper, we applied the metaphor of a rhizome to theorize the ways in which our cross-cultural yet similar experiences provide a common voice with which, (through our writing and peer mentoring), we gain social and professional support, which collectively buffer the strains associated with breaking through the larger cultural milieu of academia. There, we also signaled the need for deeper analyses that explore the points of tension in the ongoing process of cross-cultural peer mentoring. This article is therefore an extension of our first forthcoming publication in which we confront more pointedly the conflicts and tensions of cross-cultural peer mentoring and ways of negotiating these in the move toward what we envisage as productive tensions.

Perspective or Theoretical Framework

In theorizing and exploring the embedded processes within our mentoring networks, we evaluate the theoretical utility of social capital theory. As a popularized yet contentious concept in social sciences (Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998), social capital theory has been used to explain the processes, structures, contexts that underline the many different kinds of behaviors, choices, and actions of individuals within social or collaborative networks (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000).

Leading the social capital discourse is a group of social network researchers who focus on the composition, characteristic, and configuration of social networks and the returns of these connections for social capital. For many of these scholars, social capital formation and outcomes depend on the strength or weakness of social ties, the homogeneity or heterogeneity of groups of interest, and the positionality and resources among members therein. One dominant perspective is that the strength of network ties (degree of intensity, frequency, intimacy, trust) considerably affects access to related resources embedded within and outside of social networks (Coleman, 1990; Ibarra, 1995; Lin, 1999). In that regard, researchers posited that closed or closely connected networks present a structural and relational advantage where expressive social interactions enhance adherence to social norms, relations of authority, social obligation, and sanctions of the group (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1985; Palgi & Moore, 2004), promote broader commitments to group goals (Weber & Weber, 2007), create and sustain social participation (Putnam, 1993, 1995) as well as promote cooperation and cohesion within social networks (Bevelander & Page, 2011; Fukuyama, 1995; Osberg, 2003). In this sense, the

bonding and binding nature of social relations of such closed or closely connected networks serve as valuable resources for social support and social leverage as aspects of social interaction that individuals can draw on in times of need (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 2001; Putnam, 1995). These relationships are also acknowledged as a source of social fulfillment related to the need for belonging, approval, and prestige (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

While the notion of social capital is captured in the opportunities and resources embedded in social networks and the social relations that exist therein (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000), it also “evokes structural constraints ... as well as actions and choices on the part of the actors” (Lin, 2001, p. 3). Specifically, social network researchers also contended that social closure inherent in close knit networks can also impede access to opportunities and resources beyond that of the group (Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Woolcock, 2000); a process which inadvertently can threaten the advancement of social capital (Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998; Wang, 2009). As a case in point, Portes (1998) underscored the potential exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restriction of individual freedom and downward level norms as negative aspects of social closure that could possibly limit the inherent outcomes of networks. Other researchers also called attention to potentially negative effects of inequitable resources attached to the social positions of the members, their strategic locations and the degree of authority or relative control over and access to valuable resources which can promote the pursuit of self-interest or individual rather than collective mobility (Lin, 2001). These introduce weighted sources of tensions that can bring into disrepute the commitment and values of a/some member(s) who go against the grain and hinder the collective advancement of the group.

Given the above, social network researchers in this camp therefore postulated that the presence of heterogeneous members as well as weak or loosely structured friendships (rather than that which is closely knit) can also encourage social capital formation and sustenance (Granovetter, 1973; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). In the presentation of his weak tie theory, Granovetter (1973) identified the tendency for individuals to have different information and resource needs that are otherwise served by access to more diverse social circles outside of their own. As a way of moving beyond these limitations of the network, Granovetter’s (1973) seminal work therefore points to the ways in which the weak/loose nature of their social ties indirectly facilitates individual freedom and mobility in so far as they allow members to access more distinctive networks that may yield critical contacts and benefits. The strength of weak ties therefore is embedded in its bridging function, that is, its ability to link diverse and unconnected members to other resourceful networks. In this sense, access to external actors and resources may reduce the prospects for redundancy; facilitate the diffusion of asymmetrical information and by extension build on the social capital of the group (Burt, 2000). More specifically, the assertion is that loosely or informal structured networks allow members to gain knowledge (information, expertise, and ideas) that are beyond the bounds of the hierarchies and local rules that are embedded in their own formal social network (Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

How these expected benefits or constrains of heterogeneous groups become visible in cross-cultural peer mentoring and their implications for productivity amidst the chaos of tensions and difference inherent in their own diversities however remains relatively unexamined. Thus, while through the social network literature, we know of the social and professional benefits for members who participate in such networks, little is known about the complex processes that underlie working through inherent diversities of

cross-cultural mentoring collaborations particularly for women faculty. What we push forward therefore is an eclectic approach to social capital theorizing that brings together issues of diversity, embedded intergroup relations, mentoring experiences, networks, and social capital for women faculty of color. Our gaze into the structural and relational aspect of cross-cultural peer mentoring networks through the lens of social capital framework therefore allows us to unpack the complexities, processes, and paradoxes in which we engage, learn to mentor and in which we are learning to thrive.

Women's Network, Mentoring, and Social Capital

Mentoring has significant implications for the career enhancement of female faculty (Kelly, 2001) and more specifically for women of color (Tillman, 2001). Many researchers thus draw on the inherent processes and expected benefits of social networks for women's career outcomes (Alfred & Nanton, 2009). What stands out therefore in this literature, (a) a dominant yet controversial view of the critical role of social networks to women's social capital development for women in academia (Albert & Nanton, 2009; Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007) and (b) mounting yet limited examinations of the ways in which race and gender intersect to shape patterns and experiences of mentoring and networking for women of color (Jean-Marie & Brooks, 2011; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008).

Social Network Approaches

As previously indicated, social network researchers have taken the lead in formalizing and empirically testing theories related to the concept of social capital (Seibert et al., 2001). Through their examination of the patterns of social ties among women, they continue to unearth the structural dynamics, strengths, and weaknesses embedded therein.

One contention is that women tend to have smaller, socially stronger and more expressive, emotional, supportive, and homogenous ties or connections than their male counterparts who embrace more heterogeneous and strategic social networks (Popielarz, 1999; Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000). On one hand, social network researchers pointed to the relevance of relational issues (including those related to trust, obligation, reciprocity, humility, honesty, appreciation) for equity and group solidarity for understanding the processes and outcomes of such networks among women (Stanley & Lincoln, 2005). Citing related studies, Burgess (2009) also directed attention to the significance of such strong network ties (be it formal, informal) for understanding how women cope with their struggles and become empowered in the process. The argument here is that this emphasis of relational issues and its inherent focus on the strength of their social ties facilitates needed understanding of the associational value of women's networks and the implications for women faculty navigating common constraints on their professional lives while in academia (Mullen, 2005).

On the other hand, another school of thought is that such proclivities to filial bonds and homogenous patterns of engagement are inherently constraining. For Ibarra (1993), these produce noted disparities in the developmental cycle, network structure, activities, and social relations of female versus male social networks. Another stated limitation is that these patterns of social relations also set parameters for the scope and diversity of women's networks (Popielarz, 1999). In providing an explanation for these gendered

differences in the structures, processes, and outcomes of social networks, O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2008) reasoned that women gravitate toward informal networks because of ongoing experiences of isolation and marginalization in the academy. While this becomes the main driver of emerging informal networks among women, the central argument is that this structural inclination inadvertently leaves women out of important connections and conversations needed to enhance and advance their academic careers (O'Neil et al., 2008). From this perspective, what is lacking is a critical linking function in women's social networks that connect women in academia to influential people, groups, and/or resources either along the professional ladder.

One emerging paradox therefore is that while women forge supportive and productive bonds through these associations, they often have lower levels of network centrality and power within the networks (O'Neil et al., 2008; Wang, 2009). Popielarz (1999) also suggested that the "ties women form within voluntary organizations are significantly less likely to be information-rich bridging weak ties" (p. 248). Another contentious inconsistency is that while relational practice strengthens organizational structure (through collaboration, team work, conflict resolution), it does not result in appropriate rewards and recognition within their own institutions, thereby adding to their constrained career advancement (Bierema, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2008). Wang (2009) conjectured that these inherent limitations are a consequence of the noted absence of women at the helm of influence within formal organizations. As a way out, some researchers have pointed to the need for women to close the social capital gap by seeking and profiting from new relationships that serve as conduits of new information (Alder & Kwon, 2000; Burgess, 2009). This requires the formation and utilization of weak and strong social ties that forge binding, bonding, and bridging functions necessary for social capital development.

Cross-Cultural Prospects

With an increasingly diverse workforce, the experiences of women of color in academe must also be interrogated. Here, researchers have documented the myriad of ways within which women of color face unique challenges in accessing and benefiting from mentoring networks (Gregory, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002; Stanley, 2007). Some researchers have directed attention to experiences of marginalization and isolation (Turner, González, & Wood, 2008) as well as denial of collaborative research spaces (Thompson & Dey, 1998), wherein women of color can celebrate their social and cultural identities in the process of becoming a legitimate scholar (Alfred, 2001; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). In such contexts, race and gender dynamics often affect social positioning in so far as they intensify power relations that are enacted within political and social hierarchies in which people live (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002).

Peer mentoring within cross-cultural networks help women develop their sense of professional selves (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Pitts Bannister, 2009; Ragins, 1997). Thomas (2001) posited that discussion of trust and diversity in cross-race mentoring networks are key characteristics of successful minority executives. In such situations, mentoring networks not only provide opportunities for exploring cultural differences and psychosocial growth (Baker, 2007) but they also serve as important facilitators that provide contexts and processes for successful emotional, cultural, social adjustments within institutions that often isolate women in the academy (Driscoll et al., 2009; Tillman, 2001). Despite such advancement in this area of research, very few studies have

examined the racial and gender dynamics of mentoring relationships (Meyer & Warren-Gordon, 2013) and the benefits for or constraints on social capital (Bozionelos, 2006; Seibert et al., 2001) particularly for women faculty of color. Our attempt to integrate issues of gender, race, and mentoring issues within a social network framework opens up new ways of understanding social capital not as an end in itself but as an ongoing developmental process through which we strengthen our collaboration, identify, and confront our inherent challenges and by which we learn how to move forward in this journey.

Methodology

In assessing the utility of social capital theory to understandings of our mentoring experiences, we encouraged individual members of our multicultural group to explore through their personal account/narratives, the processes, freedoms, constraints, and outcomes related to working with other colleagues in our multicultural group. Where narratives delve into representation of social phenomena and action in their full richness, [meanings, actions, and intentions]-(Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997), it helps individuals make sense of their own behaviors and events that affect these (Greenhalgh & Wengraf, 2008). In the case of this research, the use of narratives facilitated personal reflections and assessments of these processes, individual perception of these and the implications for understanding how members negotiate these. It is our belief that these narratives contain important insights into the complexities of productive peer mentoring particularly for cross-cultural peer mentoring networks among women faculty.

The data in this study were collected through the use of technology (e.g. Email, Google docs, Dropbox) and group discussions via conference calls. These *technospaces* (Knouse, 2001), also present important and emerging processes where women feel not only feel supported, share linkages, information and resources, build lasting and strategic relationships (Burgess, 2009) but also interact with the ambiguities of that space (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1991) and the additional layers of positional and relational uncertainties (Henriksen & Miller, 2012). In treating with such composites, we therefore focus on five theoretical issues related to social capital; social engagement/interaction, perceptions of control and influence, social structures, social norms, and outcomes (social support/information and resource flows). Here, we asked individuals within our multicultural network to submit written personal narratives that describe the experiences of collaboration and mentoring within the group. Some of the questions included:

- (1) What are your values/beliefs surrounding social networks?
- (2) How would you characterize the quality of participation in the group? How do these lead to productive exchanges?
- (3) What do you see as your obligation, if any, to the group?
- (4) How would you describe your work style? Do you think that it is compatible with that of other members of the group?
- (5) What are some of the tensions in the group and how do you deal with these?
- (6) What do you see as the strengths and challenges of working with an all female network?

We therefore explored the complex processes of peer mentoring within cross-cultural women's networks. Using a thematic analysis, we looked for similarities as well as

differences across stories that speak to the complexities and negotiations embedded within informal mentoring networks. In this case, the use of thematic analysis allowed for the identification of patterns members' interpretation of the processes and dynamics that remain central to the group. This we achieved through the reduction and discussion of the data based on common issues and the subsequent use of excerpts or verbatim responses from members' narratives to substantiate the themes presented. We move forward in our discussion to show how these can transform into productive tensions in order to enhance the social capital of the network.

Discussion of Findings

de Souza Briggs (1998) postulated that the treasure chest of social capital is in its ability to allow individuals or groups to *get by* through social support or/and *get ahead* with social leverage. In embracing this positionality, we thus present an analysis that treats with the possibilities and drawbacks of our own peer mentoring cross-cultural network for fostering bonding and bridging functions. Thus, while we analyze the benefits of our network for helping members thrive in academia, we also use our analysis to (a) confront the challenges associated with our all women's social networks and (b) to discuss the implications for building on that social capital.

Structural Network Dynamics

We begin by stressing that the idiosyncrasies of our network formation introduce many dynamics that go against conventional understanding of women's networks. Specifically, our informal multicultural network of women faculty occasionally meet more via conference calls and social media than face to face, to discuss possible presentations and publications centered on cross-cultural mentoring and its implications for women faculty of color. At a structural level therefore, our network is primarily materialized through technology (i.e. emails, conference calls, text messaging, Skype, Google docs) thus facilitating communication and collaboration among whole group and dyads as projects develop. In this sense, our mixed modes of engagement allowed us to go beyond time and geographical constraints in the process of building the social capital of our mentoring network. Given this *modus operandi*, we also pictured our network as more fluid with a loosely structured configuration and diverse composition (both in our disciplinary and cultural backgrounds) that introduced many opportunities for peer mentoring and professional networking within the group.

Thus, at one level, the loose and heterogeneous structure of the network grant some degree of freedom, flexibility, fluidity, and multiplicity as it relates to frequency and intensity of participation and the types of leadership practices (based on one's expertise, availability or time since the last leadership role) that we embraced while sharing and mapping our diverse experiences across territories. As one multicultural network member (*MNM1*) expressed; "... the level of participation changes ... the quality of participation varies as well." For *MNM2*, this points to the strength of the group, where others can "pull back without feeling pressured to participate if it is not a good time." In such cases, *MNM4* conveyed that this type of interaction, "allowed some of us to pick up additional work if it is needed and ... keep the door open for anyone who leaves if only temporarily to come back." In reflecting on these, we identified this kind of social anatomy as

critical to the collective productivity of the group as it sanctions a more strategic approach to collaboration that are built on: a rotating assumption of leadership roles, the availability or willingness of members to be involved in the collaborative process at any one point in time and a general commitment to advance our professional lives. For many of us therefore, this sort of strategic collaboration became a significant stepping stone on which we have learned to build on our social connections and ways of negotiating academia.

We also viewed these bridging prospects as an inherent part and consequence of our larger strategic alliance with the C-y-F network from which we also access promising prospects for presentations, publications, grant funding, and other external resources. As such, what surfaces is that, the informal yet social heterogeneous nature of our women's network builds a circle of influence (borrowing from Fukuyama, 1995) and opportunity within and beyond our multicultural network. It is in such contexts where, as in our case, the structural and bridging dynamics across the various sub-groups in our informal C-y-F network builds social capital, that the strength of weak or loose social network ties becomes evident (Burt, 2000; Granovetter, 1973). What is needed therefore is some re-theorization of women's network that takes into consideration changing social and technological spaces and the implications for emerging yet inherently diverse network configurations and dynamics (Gajjala, 2001).

Social Networking Ties

At a relational level, we were also mindful of in the ways in which our central interest in multicultural issues became the common glue that holds the group together, created a sense of shared identity and gave voice to our marginalized experiences. Specifically, we all saw our gendered, cross-cultural, and marginalized institutional experiences as the basis of our unwavering sense of group solidarity. *MNM1* for instance stated that it is "an interesting group of women who have different cultural backgrounds yet share an interest in multiculturalism." Given such, *MNM4* felt that "we are all in this together ... [so the network] create[s] a place for commiserating on difficulties that members might have faced in their own institutions." Similarly, for *MNM6*, "we all share the same urgency in writing about the experiences of women of color in the academy. It is also [a] refreshing and empowering [process] ... [especially where] we often work in [institutional] silos ..." As a racial minority in academia, *MNM7* also hinted that "being in such working and living environment makes me hungry for diversity. Our network is "in" my reachable space where there is ... diversity in culture [but] similarity in other backgrounds. I am happy when I hear someone who has an accent; I am extremely proud when I see someone with similar background as mine is successful; I admire and [am] eager to follow these models and learn from them." *MNM7* also stressed that members share "... a common understanding on issues such as tenure stress, family responsibilities, because of [their] same gender."

From these perspectives, the network provided a unique cross-cultural yet touchy space within which we unpacked the cultural and racial intricacies of our institutional experiences. Through this process, we specifically identified the myriad of ways in which the network thus offered a safe haven, and a supportive network within which we can thrive outside the restrictive socio-political, gendered, and cultural walls of our institutions. In this sense, the emerging collaborative purpose of the group and the discussion

of the commonalities in our experiences transcended the divergent and diverse nature of our network. It is here that the strength of our social ties emerges, not in the presumed close knit or expressive nature of women's mentoring network as expressed in the literature on women's networks (Bevelander & Page, 2011; Renzulli et al., 2000). Given such, we put forward the need for continued research that further cross-examine the discursive and gendered contexts that shape the marginalized experiences of women faculty of color, as well as theoretical understandings of the relational dynamics within which they collaborate.

Mentoring Opportunities

On another level, we also acceded to the constructive ways in which the non-traditional configuration of our peer mentoring network creates opportunities for mentoring. Using Kram (1985)'s influential piece on *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life* as our starting point, we also reflected on the career-related and psychosocial aspects of our mentoring experiences. Thus, what emerged at another end, within our informal networking group were learning moments within which new disciplinary research practices and writing styles were introduced and passed on while collaborating on a conference presentation or manuscript production. One such case was the introduction of the use of composite narratives in our first collaborative manuscript to emphasize the role of metaphor as a tool for making sense of the common yet diverse experiences of our members. While this created an initial sense of disconnect for many who were unfamiliar with its use, it also sanctioned opportunities for sharing, learning to voice through continuous narratives, and the relevance of peer mentoring as a pedagogic alternative for professional development and friendships among members within our group. Other scholarly opportunities for peer mentoring surfaced through the process of sharing new ideas for research, pairing on related tasks, exploring unique disciplinary areas, questioning, and/or framing of research ideas and manuscripts.

Our cross-cultural network dynamics also advanced a more emotional and psychosocial aspect of peer mentoring. Thus, *MNM5* stated that "I wonder how we use our voices to speak our truths, share and empower our knowledge and become a learning community resource?" She pondered on the ways in which she can offer spaces for social support and "ethics of care" for this kind of teaching and learning to be visualized. In pushing this notion of peer mentoring as supportive learning, other multicultural network members identified the acquisition of critical supportive skills including the need for tolerance, openness, collegiality, empathy in the establishment, management and sustenance of relationships among professional women's within learning communities and networks such as ours. As a case in point, *MNMI* communicated that "when someone spends a lot of time talking about their individual experiences rather than the topic that brought us together [she tries] to think of how that personal conversation is a contribution to relationship building." Here, this multicultural member spoke of the need to develop a kind of social sensitivity that facilitates a more productive opportunity for social learning from these seemingly unrelated moments. We saw this type of social learning as an essential aspect of cross-cultural peer mentoring in which we can expand our cultural sensitivities and incorporate this into our mentoring practices. This also implied the need for open yet critical dialogue on the unique experiences, personalities, interests, and backgrounds of members within the network (Ragins, 1997; Williams & Schwiebert, 2000).

Mentoring Barriers: Structural Tensions

However, while our structural configuration and reliance on the use of *technospaces* secured some measure of productivity and opportunities to mentor, it also introduced and sustained sources of conflict and tensions within the network. As such, we also discerned that the fluidity and claims of plasticity that underpins our social exchanges and collaboration also fueled many uncertainties and trepidations that challenged our collective and productive orientations. For instance, *MNMI* expressed that “I always get the impression that what we do as part of the group is a side job.” In this case, her statement hinged on broader concerns for the social obligation and expressed commitment of others. In reflecting on the last collaborative experience, *MNM5* also divulged that “there was certainly a deeply invested momentum on the part of a couple of group members who carried the group work forward.” It is this knowledge of indifference and perceived passivity that drove *MNM3* to feel “compelled to inform the members of the group if [she] cannot make a deadline.” In the case of *MNM6*, it also induced “an obligation to pull her own weight ... to do [her] share of the work.” For *MNM5*, such expectations for network engagement ironically introduced additional sources of stress and tension in so far as she remained “baffled as to how to reach out and engage” amidst personal and institutional challenges outside of the network. For *MNM7*, such narratives not only brought into question issues of equity and accountability amidst desires for productivity but also reminded us that tensions with the group “are often interconnected and intertwined with other aspects of a person’s life such as her working environment.” However, *MNMI* also emphasized the need to re-evaluate these moments not as mere tensions but also as teaching moments in which we can “learn to be mentors in order to support women in academia who need [it].” This learning curve for us can serve as a source of productive tensions.

Mentoring Barriers: Relational Tensions

Another emerging yet paradoxical outcome of this informal peer mentoring collaborative process is that while issues of diversity and marginalization of women faculty of color served as the epicenter of the group and provided a vehicle through which we can use our experiences as a voice of hope, it also enhanced our vulnerability to the very nature of own multiplicities. Thus, we also declare that our cross-cultural and cross-racial network also creates sites of tensions and barriers for learning while collaborating in peer mentoring network. For instance, in a recent group meeting, *MNM5* indicated that while we do have common interest in multicultural issues, our racial differences still remain a sensitive issue. In such a case, what surfaced is some degree of quiet discomfort where the sensitive nature of race relations, not as a measure of our phenotypic differences but of historical power structures and sources of marginalization, also created ongoing levels of difficulty both in confronting and moving beyond it. While this may be the case, it was expressed neither in our discussions nor through our reflections on the collaborative process, our collective voicing of racial- and gender-based marginalization in academe through our writings or in the experiences of peer mentoring within the network. We also acknowledge the ways in which our reliance on virtual networking for our collaboration intensifies this blaring silence. For Thomas (2001), such refrain from dealing with these touchy issues prevent the potential benefit of learning how to build and sustain psychosocial support and to mentor others to do the same.

Where these issues remain unresolved or unaddressed, these not only sustain positional, individual, epistemological, or situational sources of conflicts but avoid authentic dialogue around related network tensions. Particularly, many multicultural members expressed great concern over the casual or tactical nature of our social connectedness and its implications for professional and/or personal bonding as well opportunities for learning to bond and to mentor within such networks. Thus, *MNM2* wrote that:

rarely ... do [we] discuss other ways to work together or even to engage in dialogue around personal issues that may impact work, perspective, etc ... [or] ... just talk, share ideas, cultivate relationships. We ... possess a sense of concern for one another ... [but] at times it seems superficial at best ... I would like for more mentoring to occur ... I see this developing.

MNM5 also communicated that “my sense is that a professional friendship is not the intent of members of the group. It is something I value, welcome and need.” Similarly, *MNM6* expressed that:

in a mentoring experience, the key is to build relationships with folks, or feel comfortable asking for advice etc. ... because I haven’t built much of that with members; I don’t feel as comfortable asking for advice ... I have an obligation to ask for it when I need it but I don’t”. Perhaps because I don’t want to seem weak or incompetent but I try to figure things out on my own.

We concede that such discontent with the primacy of our productive engagement has deep seated implications for building social norms and cohesiveness needed for effective peer mentoring and collaboration to take place within our network. Thus, while the issue of trust in our professional commitment formed the basis of our confidence in the integrity, commitment, expertise of and support for all members of the network, the inability of some members to confide in and interact with others who are at similar or different professional levels also served as an impediment to genuine and deeper social ties in the network.

Thus, uncertainties prevail over questions around who can one turn to for guidance, thrash out an idea, ask for a favor, and/or to share a personal moment. For example, *MNM2* uttered that “I work better when I trust people and for me trust is to know someone. I am developing relationships in the group albeit slowly-geography hinders this.” Here, we noted the dynamic and temporal nature of the tensions that emerge around social ties. Thus, we were aware that some of our members in the network have an independent relationship and deeper connection based on their shared institutional affiliation. While, we remained unsure as to the possible bearing (positive and/or negative) of this on the cohesiveness of our network, we also considered the prospects for deeper connections to emerge from new relationships that are developing in our network. Thus, *MNM2* revealed that:

I have begun moving beyond the surface with another member ... we are lead authors on two pieces and thus talk/communicate a great deal and over time we have begun to share through conversation other aspects of our professional and personal selves ... it is the authentic new and seasoned relationships that lead to productive exchanges.

In this sense, we assert that the sharing of and appreciation for diversity can also facilitate a shift from interaction as professional camaraderie to interaction as social

cohesiveness. However, we do not attempt to paint a rose-tinted glass of peer mentoring as a social process. In fact, *MNM3* alluded that “members are generally supportive of each other so it creates some kind of space to be open ... [but] where there is open dismissal of ideas, it also creates a feeling of distrust.” For most members, the virtual nature of our cross-cultural networking, the lack of and snail-slow pace of our personal interaction resulted in the short-lived nature of such moments. Others recognized however the deeper implications of these seemingly fleeting moments for the broader social norms in and social cohesiveness of the group. *MNM6* for instance declared that where “everything is through email, we really lose the personal aspects of interaction and group cohesion.” Thus, for *MNM4*, while in such circumstance, “there is a huge effort to be polite [she is not sure] whether it is helpful to anyone [for] we might have missed an opportunity to mentor or learn ...” What emerged within the network therefore is a misalignment between the productive or collaborative purpose of the network and the mentoring as well as relational or interpersonal needs of its members. Where, as in the case of our network experience, little opportunities exist for building personal relationships through social interactions, we also accept that these also have implications for the level of relational embeddedness of network members and the influence of this on our behavior (see Granovetter, 1992). We see this requirement for relational embeddedness as developing through ongoing learning moments which the network offers.

Productive Tensions: Moving Forward

In working out and moving beyond these tensions, we therefore advance the need for ongoing reflection and further research on these structural models, processes, and discursive contexts that shape patterns of peer mentoring and extent of social capital within cross-cultural informal networks. We specifically call to attention the ways in which the confrontation of such tensions can also promote learning (to collaborate) and to support other marginalized women faculty of color while collaborating.

Where such conversations highlight the delicate nature of our cross-cultural exchanges and interactions, we advocate the need to move beyond tolerance to more constructive or perhaps structured engagement of these diversities. For, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2002), this requires an acknowledgement that “mentoring across cultural boundaries is an especially delicate dance that juxtaposes group norms and societal pressures” (p. 15) while reshaping of racially defined relations of power in cross-cultural mentoring networks. We also embrace the recommendations of Stanley and Lincoln (2005) who argued that cross-ethnic mentoring requires a certain measure of sensitivity and openness to issues related to racial privileging. Such a process compels not only an authentic desire to understand elements of cultural variability and their inherent nuances but also the development of flexible cultural lenses (Zachary, 2011) and the management of cultural perceptions that are gained through experiences, environments, and interactions (Baker, 2007).

In this networking dance (applying Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's metaphor), there are ongoing hidden forces that can threaten cross-cultural mentoring opportunities. In this case, what we observed is that our silences on the inherent cultural, racial, epistemological differences introduce an inherent vulnerability to these covert yet potentially destructive forces. We are also aware of the ways in which these can threaten effective cross-race relations (Bowman, Kite, Branscombe, & Williams, 2000). It is with this

understanding that we support the need for some rethinking of intrinsic attitudes toward diversity, as well as some engagement in constructive dialogues regarding the unique experiences, personalities, interests, and backgrounds in cross-cultural mentoring (Ragins, 1997; Turban, Dougherty, & Lee, 2002; Williams & Schwiebert, 2000). It is here that we begin to (a) unearth how the potential productive or destructive force of tension seems to hinge on how we bring them to the surface and work through them, (b) initiate the process for learning to create mentoring spaces within which we can reframe tensions as productive, and (c) address the lacunae in existing theorization of informal cross-cultural peer mentoring networks among women faculty.

Conclusions

Granovetter (1973) seminal work hints at the utility of diverse networks. More recent works not only provide empirical support for the value of diverse networks (Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000) but has also raise questions regarding the potential challenges of mentoring within cross-cultural networks (Eby et al., 2000). We therefore advance theoretical discussions related to the complexities of divergent networks and the practical dynamics that govern the social capital outcomes of collaborations therein. In the case of our cross-cultural network, we are conscious of the ways in which at one end, the primacy of our productive collaboration and marginalized experiences serve as the social glue that keeps our network together and facilitates our productivity. However, we are also mindful of the ways in which our modes of communication, social relations, and divergent backgrounds constrain our potential for mentoring and introduce many conflicts and sources of tensions that threaten the social capital of our network.

While our use of virtual spaces buffers the possible negative outcomes of these tensions (Agosto et al., *in press*), we advocate the need for bolder yet constructive confrontations of these tensions. We consent that this as a developmental process that requires ongoing dialogue, familiarity, a growing sense of collaborative consciousness within which we accept, explore, and move beyond our ethnic differences (Creamer, 2003). This involves the need for more fluid as well as ongoing modes of interaction that are supported by an unwavering commitment to the network, openness for learning and relearning. It also calls for needed sensitivity and acceptability of ethnic and racial differences in order to secure effective learning relationships as a critical aspect of productive tensions in peer mentoring networks.

Note

1. MNM represents an acronym for multicultural network member. With seven members in the group, we refer to excerpts drawn from *MNMI* to *MNM7*. These are used to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of members.

Notes on contributors

Talia Esnard is an assistant professor at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. Her research interests include educational leadership, mentoring and networks, creativity, critical pedagogy, and transformational learning as well as mothering and entrepreneurship in the context of the Caribbean. Her work has been published in several journals including the Journal of Asian Academy of Management, Journal of Higher Education and Practice, Caribbean Curriculum, and Journal of Educational Administration and History.

PRODUCTIVE TENSIONS IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PEER MENTORING
WOMEN'S NETWORK

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Deirdre Cobb-Roberts is an associate professor at the University of South Florida. Her research explores the history of American higher education, teacher preparation with an emphasis on cultural diversity, and the role of social justice in culturally responsive and responsible pedagogy. She has a co-edited book and has published in journals such as the *History of Education Quarterly* and the *Journal of Teacher Education*.

Vonzell Agosto is an assistant professor at the University of South Florida. Her research focuses on educator preparation, curriculum leadership, and anti-oppressive education. She has published in journals such as the *Journal of School Leadership*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*.

Zorka Karanxha is an associate professor at the University of South Florida. Her research examines issues of educational leadership preparation for social justice, education law, and charter schools. She has published in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Journal of Research in Educational Leadership*, and many other journals.

Makini Beck is a research associate at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Her research explores issues of international teachers' cultural transitions and classroom experiences, Narrative Inquiry, Womanist theory, and Culturally Relevant research methods and teaching pedagogy. She has two publications (in press) on informal peer mentoring.

Ke Wu is an associate professor in the Department of Mathematical Science at the University of Montana. Her research interests include statistical modeling in education, STEM learning, and multicultural curriculum. Her publications appear in a variety of journals such as *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* and *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*.

Ann Unterreiner is a research consultant. Her research addresses issues of equity and social justice in education and mentorship of women faculty in institutions of higher education. Her publications can be found in journals such as *Education and Society* and *Multicultural Teaching and Learning*.

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