

Socialization Demands and Mentoring Needs of Ethnic and Racial Minority Graduate Students

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Abstract

Ethnic and racial minority (ERM) people are projected to comprise the US majority by 2050. In tandem, there is an anticipated rise of ERM students in higher education. Research examining academic socialization to dominant culture expectations and culturally-informed mentoring is limited. Existing work is theoretical, qualitative, or does not empirically compare the experience of ERM and White students. In this study we compared the experiences of ERM and White graduate students ($N=349$) via data collected from 2020 to 2023. We found no significant difference between ERM and White students' reported pressure to conform to dominant culture. However, ERM students reported higher pressure to leave their cultural background behind and higher academic consequences for refusing to alter/change aspects of their cultural identity. Furthermore, ERM students reported higher difficulty in securing culturally-informed mentoring than their White peers. Institutions of higher education may support their ERM students by increasing access to culturally-informed mentoring.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Race, White, graduate students, academic socialization, culturally-informed mentoring

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Socialization Demands and Mentoring Needs of Ethnic and Racial Minority Graduate Students

The American Council on Education (ACE; 2017) estimates that ethnic and racial minority (ERM) students comprised 39.2% of the U.S. graduate student population. Meron, Williams, and Stamm (2023) examined American Psychological Association (APA) data from the 2021-22 academic year and found that psychology master's students were 40.5% ERM and 52% White. The corresponding numbers for psychology doctoral students were 36.8% ERM and 54% White. More broadly, data from a supplemental ACE report (Taylor et al., 2020) reveals that master's degree recipients were 25.5% ERM and 50.9% White. Similarly, doctoral and professional degrees recipients were 25.9% ERM and 56% White. Data from the 2020 Census (Jones et al., 2021) indicates that the White population decreased by 8.6% since 2010. However, ERM populations increased (i.e., 5.6% African/African American/Black, 23% Hispanic/Latino/Latinx, 27.1% American Indian/Alaska Native, 27.8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 35.5% Asian/Asian American/South Asian). The 276% increase in the multiracial population was particularly notable. Given the increases in the ERM population, it is anticipated that there will be a corresponding increase of ERM representation in higher education. To thrive, it is important for institutions of higher education to understand how to better serve this growing demographic.

Brunsma et al. (2016) highlight that ERM graduate students must “navigate and consider structural and systemic racism within postsecondary education” (p.6). Zhou et al. (2004) assert that ERM graduate students experience racism, microaggressions, and discrimination within their programs. Eads et al. (2023) found that ERM social work doctoral students witnessed and experienced more discriminatory events than their White peers. These experiences negatively impact ERM students' psychological well-being. For example, Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017) found that imposter syndrome was amplified in Black, female, doctoral students when they were not accepted and when they experienced racism. Thus, it is important to have a clearer understanding of the experience of ERM students in higher education.

The challenges experienced by ERM students begin at lower levels (e.g., high school, community college, undergraduate; Booker & Brevard, 2017) and extend into graduate studies. Efforts to retain ERM students at lower educational levels impact whether these students seek graduate education. Booker and Brevard found that the transition from high school to undergraduate studies is a sensitive time when ERM students benefit from additional support through mentorship by administration, faculty, staff, and peers of color. Similarly, Nettles (1990) and Luedke et al. (2019) asserted that proper preparation for the transition from undergraduate to a graduate program increases the likelihood that ERM students will perform better in their graduate studies.

This study focuses on academic socialization to dominant culture expectations and culturally-informed mentoring. The literature that exists is theoretical (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Brunsma et al., 2016; Twale et al., 2016), qualitative (Gardner, 2008), or does not empirically compare ERM versus White students (Booker & Brevard, 2017; Chan et al., 2015). Academic socialization to dominant culture expectations refers to the pressure to conform to the dominant culture (i.e., Western/European culture) in students' respective graduate

programs. We conceptualize culturally-informed mentoring in a manner consistent with Byars-Winston et al.'s (2018) culturally aware mentoring. More specifically, culturally-informed mentors are self-aware (e.g., know their culturally shaped beliefs, perceptions, judgements), able to recognize similarities and differences between themselves and others (e.g., mentees), and are able to detect and address diversity concerns that arise in the context of the mentoring relationship.

Academic Socialization

When entering a new environment (e.g., job, school), one often adapts to the expectations of the given context. Similarly, graduate students acclimate as they learn the nuances, accepted behaviors, and values of their program. The White and androcentric history of higher education defines how institutions operate and who they serve (Gardner, 2008). Programs, intentionally or not, tend to produce more of the same students (e.g., White and male). This is because the socialization process is unilateral and students are often expected to abandon identities that diverge from institutional norms (Luedke et al., 2019). Margolis and Romero (1998) identified barriers to the success of graduate female sociology students (i.e., dominant culture expectations to conform). They identified a “hidden curriculum” whereby the pervading dominant culture delineates expectations that have been in place for decades. Gardner interviewed history and chemistry doctoral students who were outside of the “norm” (e.g., part-time, parents, women, ERM, older students) and found that they assimilate in order to succeed.

Academic socialization pressures are often amplified for ERM students and may challenge their successful adjustment to academic programs (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Twale et al., 2016). ERM students reported working harder than their peers to prove themselves with little reward or acknowledgement of these efforts (Gardner, 2008). This can damage students' sense of self, satisfaction, and persistence (Luedke et al., 2019). Gardner indicates that ERM students, who are not able to successfully assimilate, leave their institutions at higher rates than their White peers. Cultural pluralism is important for ERM students because it allows them to maintain their culture (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). However, to our knowledge, the academic socialization experiences of graduate ERM and White students have not been directly compared empirically. We do so in this study.

Culturally-Informed Mentoring

Mentoring is important for students (Brunsma et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2006) and may be even more crucial for ERM graduate students (Chan et al., 2015; Rogers & Molina, 2006; Tram et al., 2022; Tram et al., 2023). Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2001) theorize that culturally-informed mentoring has a higher impact on ERM students than White students.

The need for culturally-informed mentoring stems from “cultural discontinuity,” a term identified by Tyler et al. (2008) as “a school-based behavioral process where the cultural value-based learning references and practices of many ethnic minority students – those typically originating from home or parental socialization activities – are discontinued at school (p. 281).” Although cultural discontinuity has primarily been researched in secondary education populations (Taggart, 2017; Yeh et al., 2014), the concept is relevant to ERM students in

graduate settings. All students may experience discontinuities between home and school but these discrepancies are likely more pronounced for ERM students (Tyler et al., 2008).

Davis (2007) found that mentoring helped Black undergraduate students increase their knowledge about funding, strengthen their professional development and networks, and increased their confidence in pursuing their future careers. Chan et al.'s (2015) multicultural mentoring model indicates that faculty mentors influence ERM doctoral psychology students in three ways: career support and guidance customized to the concerns of ERM students, a relationship that emphasizes relationship and trust, and recognizing that ERM students are people in context (e.g., family, community, university, field, society, culture). Research also indicates that ERM students with faculty mentors report more satisfaction with their studies (Castellanos et al., 2016) and have higher retention (Ellis, 2001; Proctor et al., 2018).

The need for more culturally-informed mentoring led to the development of the National Research Mentoring Network (NRMN) in 2014. This national consortium was developed to increase the diversity of researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in fields such as biomedical, behavioral, clinical, and social sciences. The goal was to foster the development of skills necessary to effectively mentor diverse scholars (e.g., women, ERM). The result was the development of Culturally Aware Mentoring (CAM), an intervention piloted by Byars-Winston et al. (2018) and re-evaluated by Womack et al. (2020). CAM is a day-long intervention comprised of three parts: intrapersonal awareness (e.g., self-reflection, self-awareness), interpersonal awareness (e.g., awareness of key terms such as bias, stereotype; critical race theory), and skill-building (e.g., fostering critical thinking and communication via role plays and case vignettes).

Although culturally-informed mentoring is beneficial, comparing the ability to access culturally-informed mentoring by ERM versus White graduate students has not been empirically examined. We seek to do so in this study.

Research Questions

We ask two primary questions in this study. First, are there significant differences between ERM and White student reported levels of academic socialization to dominant culture expectations? Second, are there significant differences between ERM and White students in their ability to obtain culturally-informed mentoring?

Method

Participants

Our sample of 349 participants ranged in age from 18 to 61 years ($M=27.32$, $SD = 5.63$). They represented a number of fields: 43.3% ($n=151$) humanities and social sciences, 36.4% ($n=127$) natural sciences, 6.0% ($n=21$) professional and applied sciences, and 2.6% ($n=9$) formal sciences. In terms of ethnic and racial identity: 0.3% ($n=1$) of our sample identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.3% ($n=1$) Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.4% ($n=5$) Middle Eastern, 2.9% ($n=10$) African/African American/Black, 9.7% ($n=34$) Hispanic/Latino/Latinx, 12.3% ($n=43$) Asian/Asian American/South Asian, 58.2% ($n=203$) White/European, 4.0% ($n=14$) Biracial, and 1.7% ($n=6$) Multiracial. Genderqueer people comprised 1.1% ($n=4$) of our sample, 4.9% ($n=17$) were nonbinary, 21.8% ($n=76$) were men, and 63.9% ($n=223$) were

women. In terms of annual household income, 5.2% ($n=18$) had an annual income of less than \$1000, 7.2% ($n=25$) \$1001-\$10 000, 13.5% ($n=47$) \$10 001-\$20 000, 22.3% ($n=78$) \$20 001-\$30 000, 15.2% ($n=53$) \$30 001-\$50 000, 7.4% ($n=26$) \$50 001-\$75 000, 6.0% ($n=21$) \$75 001-\$100 000, and 5.1% ($n=18$) over \$100 001.

Measures

A 78-item questionnaire was created to gather demographic and variable-related information. The items for our questionnaire were adapted from a previous study by our research group. The academic socialization subscale was comprised of three questions (e.g., I am expected to culturally conform to majority White culture to meet the academic expectations of my program, I believe I need to change aspects of my cultural identity to meet the academic expectations of my program, refusing to alter/change aspects of my cultural identity to meet the academic expectations of my program would impact my academic standing in the program). Cronbach's alpha for the three-item academic socialization subscale was .781. The culturally-informed mentoring subscale was also comprised of three questions (i.e., does not consider my context (e.g., who I am in terms of individual, family, culture), is not able to provide me guidance tailored to my ethnicity, does not understand my experience with my ethnicity) and had a Cronbach's alpha of .872.

Procedure

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare. After receiving authorization from our institutional review board, we collected data from ERM and White graduate students in the USA. We recruited participants via social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), listservs, as well as via their institutions of higher education (e.g., programs, graduate student union, multicultural centers). Representatives were contacted via email and asked to disseminate our study to graduate students. A link to our online survey was distributed to enrolled students, along with a statement about the study purpose and participation requirements. Graduate students who chose to participate in the study and met the criteria for eligibility (i.e., 18 years or older and were enrolled as a current graduate student in the United States) completed an informed consent form along with the questionnaire. Based on these criteria, our study yielded a sample of 349 participants.

Results

We conducted one way MANOVAs to investigate the impact of ethnicity on academic socialization and culturally-informed mentoring. Results are presented in Table 1 and 2 respectively. There was a statistically significant difference in academic socialization based on ethnicity, $F(3, 258) = 23.29, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.787$, partial $\eta^2 = .213$. After correcting for multiple comparisons, we had three findings. First, there was not a significant difference between ERM ($M = 52.39, SD = 36.58$) and White ($M = 47.43, SD = 32.65$) students' reported pressure to conform to dominant culture, $F(1, 260) = 1.28; p = .259$; partial $\eta^2 = .005$. However, ERM students reported significantly higher pressure ($M = 44.52, SD = 33.85$) than their White peers ($M = 16.28, SD = 25.66$) to leave their cultural background behind, $F(1, 260) = 57.82; p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .182$. In addition, ERM students reported significantly higher levels ($M = 43.05, SD =$

35.38) of academic consequences than their White peers ($M = 18.41$, $SD = 26.85$) for refusing to alter/change aspects of their cultural identity, $F(1, 260) = 40.27$; $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .134$.

Table 1
Academic Socialization

Academic Socialization	ERM ($n=95$)		White ($n=167$)		$F(1,260)$	p -value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Pressure to Conform	52.39	36.58	47.43	32.65		0.259
Pressure to Leave Culture Behind	44.52	33.85	16.28	25.66		0.001
Academic Consequences	43.05	35.38	18.41	26.85		0.001

ERM and White students had statistically significant differences in obtaining culturally-informed mentoring, $F(3, 189) = 32.30$, $p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.661$, partial $\eta^2 = .339$. More specifically, after correcting for multiple comparisons, we had three significant findings. First, ERM ($M = 55.24$, $SD = 34.96$) students experienced more difficulty finding a mentor that considered their context (e.g., individual, family, culture) than White peers ($M = 35.48$, $SD = 33.10$; $F(1, 191) = 15.08$; $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .073$). Second, ERM students reported higher difficulty ($M = 50.07$, $SD = 37.79$) finding a mentor that was able to provide guidance based on their ethnicity than their White counterparts ($M = 15.70$, $SD = 24.37$; $F(1, 191) = 58.71$; $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .235$). Third, ERM students reported more difficulty ($M = 49.49$, $SD = 37.03$) finding mentors that understand their ethnic experiences than their White peers ($M = 10.55$, $SD = 19.20$; $F(1, 191) = 92.66$; $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .327$).

Table 2
Culturally-Informed Mentoring

Culturally-Informed Mentoring	ERM ($n=68$)		White ($n=125$)		$F(1,191)$	p -value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Mentor Considers Context	55.24	34.96	35.48	33.1		0.001
Mentor Provides Ethnic Guidance	50.07	37.79	15.7	24.37		0.001
Mentor Understands Ethnic Experience	49.49	37.03	10.55	19.2		0.001

Discussion

Academic Socialization

Overall, ERM students reported significantly higher academic socialization demands than their White peers. An interesting pattern of results exist when we examine the individual items. ERM and White students did not significantly differ in the belief that they were expected to culturally conform to dominant culture to meet the academic expectations of their program. Thus, both ERM and White students indicated that they need to conform to a White academic environment. However, ERM students reported higher pressure to change aspects of their cultural identity to meet the academic expectations of their programs. Furthermore, ERM

students also reported higher impact on their academic standing, for refusing to alter or change aspects of their cultural identity.

It is important for stakeholders to be aware of the increased expectations placed on ERM students to conform. Successful socialization to academia is crucial for academic success (Austin, 2002). However, it is particularly challenging for ERM students (DeBord & Millner, 1993; Turner & Thompson, 1993) because academic expectations seldom consider cultural differences (Gardner, 2008; Gonzalez, 2006). As a result, ERM students often experience pressure to prove to White faculty and students that they are academically qualified (Ellis, 2001). The norms deeply rooted in higher education translate into explicit and covert messages that convey to ERM students that their culturally-based behaviors undermine academic success (Tyler et al., 2008). For example, negative faculty attitudes, even when expressed covertly, contribute to a “chilly” learning environment (Rogers & Molina, 2006). ERM students navigate more realms of fit (e.g., faculty-student alignment, research interests; Blockett et al., 2016), experience more “racial isolation” (Brunsma et al., 2017), and are more likely to perceive that they are inadequate and do not belong (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Clark et al., 2012; Curtin et al., 2013; Graham & McClain, 2019).

Culturally-Informed Mentoring

Given the higher academic socialization demands for ERM students, it is important to consider access to culturally-informed mentoring. Unfortunately, ERM students had more difficulty finding a good, culturally-informed mentor, than their White peers. More specifically, ERM students had more difficulty finding mentors that consider their context (e.g., individual, family, and culture), mentors that provide guidance tailored to their ethnicity, and mentors that understand their experience with their ethnicity.

Our findings suggest that ERM students perceive academia as a place where they need to change who they are in order to succeed. We can create a more welcoming environment by connecting ERM students with mentors who have the ability to guide them in a culturally sensitive manner. ERM students with faculty mentors experience higher cultural fit, college satisfaction (Castellanos et al., 2016), and retention (Ellis, 2001; Proctor et al., 2018). Twale et al.’s (2016) literature review indicates that positive and strong mentoring relationships are associated with higher retention of ERM students. This may be attributable to mentors that understand and are able to guide ERM students through the additional demands and strain of acclimating to graduate programs.

However, our findings indicate that ERM students have difficulty accessing culturally-informed mentors. Ethnic or racial background congruency between student and mentor is important (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005) and ERM students may prefer and report more satisfaction when they have ERM mentors (Chan et al., 2015). Rogers and Molina (2006) suggest that ERM mentors can offer insight on how to navigate graduate programs and help students gain awareness of potential areas of concern that they may encounter as a ERM student. With this in mind, it is possible that ERM faculty and staff may aid ERM students in addressing institutional issues and simultaneously provide support and guidance.

However, there is a paucity of ERM mentors and research suggests mentoring may be impactful independent of faculty ethnicity (Blake-Beard et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2004; Twale et

al.). Homogeneity of values between faculty mentor and mentee is important (Sverdilk et al., 2018). For example, Phinney et al. (2006) found that ERM students reported that helping their families (e.g., to get an education in order to help my parents/family financially) as a significantly more important reason to seek higher education than White students, after controlling for socioeconomic status. Twale et al. noted that mentors sufficiently provided academic support, but struggled to provide emotional support to their students. Mentors should also be knowledgeable about culture-specific challenges (e.g., lack of role models, racism, family obligation, disconnect of cultural and professional identities) and consider ERM students in context (e.g., family, community, university, field, society, culture; Chan et al., 2015). Students have a broader context that is important to attend to. This context includes their role in their family and community (e.g., provider to the family unit), ethnic and racial identity (Banks & Dohy, 2019), family influence (Luedke, 2017), and other culture-specific factors (e.g., intersecting areas of identity). ERM student context may also involve intersection with additional realms of diversity (e.g., ability status, sexual orientation, gender).

Thus, it is important for us to consider how we will be able to provide more culturally-informed mentoring to ERM graduate students. Training models like Culturally Aware Mentoring (CAM; Byars-Winston et al., 2018; Womack et al., 2020) have empirical support and demonstrate promise. However, it is important for us to continue to examine ways to foster and develop more culturally-informed mentoring to our ERM students to better support and hopefully retain them.

Limitations and Future Research

To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to empirically and quantitatively compare the academic socialization and culturally-informed mentoring experiences of ERM and White students. However, our study does have a number of limitations. First, despite our best efforts, we have a larger sample of White than ERM participants. This could be attributable to our sampling, despite our efforts. Second, it is important to consider that the mentoring relationship may look different from field to field and program to program. Third, some fields may not be as likely to consider contextual factors when mentoring and supporting ERM students because they may view this as separate from their role as an academic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the academic socialization expectations placed on ERM students and their ability to access culturally-informed mentoring. We compared the experiences of graduate ERM and White students and identified ways in which their needs may differ. Our study indicates that ERM students face higher pressures to academically socialize and a higher level of difficulty in finding mentors that consider their context and ethnicity. These factors are important to consider when identifying ways in which to better support and retain ERM graduate students. Our results add to the current literature on ERM graduate students and ways in which their needs are different than White students. We hope that stakeholders will consider these ERM-specific needs when developing initiatives to support them at educational institutions. When ERM student needs are considered, it creates the opportunity for them to

successfully complete their educational programs (Twale et. al., 2016; Womack et. al., 2020) and start to address some of the disparity that exists in our broader society.

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