

## **Mentoring Experiences of Indo-Caribbean Immigrants in the United States**

Rehana Seepersad  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** This research explored perceptions of Indo-Caribbean protégés in cross-cultural mentoring experiences with White, Black, Black Cherokee, Indian and Hispanic mentors. Environmental forces, mentor influences, and knowledge sharing shaped these relationships. This research implies that mentors' and protégés' understanding of each others' values, beliefs, and attitudes enhance outcomes of the relationship.

The increase in cultural diversity from high rates of migration to the U. S. (Camarota, 2007) has resulted in mentoring relationships where either or both participants, that is, mentor and protégé, are from different ethnic cultures. Mentoring is defined as an “intense caring relationship in which persons with more experience work with less experienced persons to promote both professional and personal development” (Caffarella, 1992, p. 38).

In cross-cultural mentoring, mentors and protégés from different racial or ethnic cultures confront social and cultural identities, goals, expectations, values, and beliefs (Cross & Lincoln, 2005) in an effort to “achieve a higher level of potency in education and society” (Mullen, 2005, p. 6). Good cross-cultural mentoring relationships require participants' willingness to acknowledge and understand the experiences of those from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001).

Understanding diverse backgrounds leads to improved intercultural communication, enhanced flexibility, adaptability, unity and acceptance, awareness of differences, broader perspectives, emotional satisfaction, and increased creativity and productivity (Brinson & Kottler, 1993). Cross-cultural mentoring relationships encompass participants' “values, beliefs, and behaviors...defined by nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, physical characteristics, sexual orientation, economic status, education, profession, religion, organizational affiliation, and any other grouping that generates identifiable patterns” (Bennett & Bennett, 2003, p. 150). As a result, mentors and protégés confront a range of thinking styles, social and cultural identities, expertise and aspirations (Cross & Lincoln, 2005) which influence deference to authority, conflict management, assertiveness, self-concept and relationships (Marquardt & Loan, 2006).

### **Problem Statement**

Although demographics and migration patterns in the U. S. have changed, mentoring studies still focus on European Americans (Blake-Beard, 1999) and African Americans (Dickey, 1996; Jackson & Harris, 2007). Fewer studies explore mentoring of Latin Americans (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Roland, 2008), Asian Americans (Henderson & Chan, 2005; Lew, Chang & Wang, 2005), and Native Americans (Portman & Garrett, 2005). Within these studies, protégés reported experiencing acceptance, visibility, increased achievement, socialization, trust and relationship building that enhanced their learning (Jeria, 2002; White, 2006).

Caribbean immigrants in the U. S. include descendants of Europeans, Africans, East Indians, Hispanics, Indonesians, Javanese, Chinese and native or Aboriginal Indians (Premdas, 1995). Indo-Caribbeans, descendants of East Indians who were taken to the Caribbean as

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indentured laborers, are now among the Caribbean immigrants who come to the U.S. each year in search of education, work and an improved life (Henke, 2001). No studies were located that explore the cross-cultural mentoring experiences of Indo-Caribbeans in the United States. As a result, there is a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of Indo-Caribbeans.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine Indo-Caribbean protégés' perceptions regarding their cross-cultural mentoring experiences in the United States to understand the nature of their mentoring relationships in the work force and in various learning environments.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question is: How do Indo-Caribbean protégés in the U. S. perceive their cross-cultural mentoring experiences? Secondary research questions are (a) What factors do Indo-Caribbean protégés report that facilitate their successful cross-cultural mentoring relationships; (b) What challenges do Indo-Caribbean protégés encounter within their cross-cultural mentoring relationships; and (c) What mentoring strategies and practices do Indo-Caribbean protégés believe will help to enhance their professional development.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Mentoring relationships build intrinsic value for both mentor and protégé (Newby & Corner, 1997) in the form of development, relationship and understanding that occurs through constructivist, socio-cultural and psychological frameworks.

The constructivist framework develops as mentors provide opportunities for protégés to internalize new processes and construct their own knowledge and understanding to try out ideas, skills, and roles with minimal risk (Kaye & Jacobson, 1996). Mentors and protégés learn from each other through networking, counseling, guiding, instructing and modeling in the sense that they construct, create, invent and develop their own knowledge (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 1996). Protégés' experiences serve as a lens for observations of the mentors' actions and allow protégés to form their own interpretation of situations from a more subjective stance, offering more meaningful, dependable, memorable beliefs and perspectives (Mezirow, 1991).

The socio-cultural framework of mentoring is grounded in collaborative learning which emphasizes that "the world about us defines who and what we ought to be as adults" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 118). The protégé's world includes social supports, assistance, guidance and interactions with peers, experts, and teachers, i.e., physical contexts (Shi, Mishra, & Bonk, 2004), as well as classroom and institutional culture. Sociocultural factors that are embedded within minority groups may form barriers that lead to mistrust, caution, power relations, oppression, discrimination, judgment, and reduced opportunities (Brinson & Kottler, 1993).

The psychosocial framework is the internal value which develops through ongoing interpersonal dialogue, collaborative critical thinking, planning, reflection, and feedback (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995) between mentor and protégé. By serving as a role-model, encouraging and supporting new behaviors, providing safe and trustworthy counsel, and through shared or informal interaction, mentors enhance protégés' sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness (Kaye & Jacobson, 1996).

### **Research Method**

Phenomenology is used to explore the lived experiences of participants, regarding a specific concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). It is "the systematic attempt to uncover and describe...the internal meaning structures, of lived experience [by studying the] particulars or instances as they are encountered" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Using phenomenology was ideal

for this study as it supported in-depth data collection, using multiple sources, about the phenomenon of cross-cultural mentoring, to explore “the structures of consciousness in [protégés’] human experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51).

Criterion and snowball sampling was used to recruit 15 participants for this study. A semi-structured interview guide that consisted of open-ended questions related to their cross-cultural mentoring relationships was used to conduct the interviews. The individuals in this study are Indo-Caribbeans from the English-speaking Caribbean, who at the time of these mentoring relationships were graduate students or working professionals. Pseudonyms have been used in all instances in order to protect participants. Creswell’s (2007) simplified version of Moustakas’s (1994) Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data was used to analyze the data using an inductive and contextual approach.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The 15 participants reported on their perceptions as protégés in dyadic cross-cultural mentoring relationships with mentors who were European Americans, African Americans, and East Indian directly from India, Black Cherokee, and Hispanic. Protégés’ perceptions were shaped by East Indian traditional practices that influenced their approach to learning and education. Mentor influences were primarily shaped by ethno-cultural factors developed within the U.S., or in their native homelands. Three themes emerged from analysis of the data: (a) environmental forces, (b) mentor influence, and (c) knowledge sharing. The themes and sub-themes are presented below together with quotes from participants’ interview transcripts to support the findings.

#### **Environmental Forces**

Environmental forces refer to individuals within participants’ personal or professional spaces, as well as aspects of their environments that influence them in various ways. Environmental forces may empower protégés “intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). Participants’ immediate and extended families formed a huge segment of their environments which helped to shape the adults they became. Environmental forces that emerged from this study include (a) family influences, (b) cultural influences, and (c) external influences.

**Family influences.** Family influences refer to the learning, guidance and examples that participants observed among their relatives, both immediate and extended. Since learning and guidance begins within one’s immediate internal environment, one’s family, whether immediate, or extended, can serve as a person’s first learning environment. Protégés in this study spoke to how the support and actions of their families shaped who they became as individuals. They discussed the value their families placed on education, making sacrifices, and discipline; compassion, charity and giving; respect; and religion and spirituality. Participants shared that their upbringing taught them useful life lessons that they continue to practice even today in their own lives. They spoke to the discipline, respect, traditions and religious practices that were instilled in their parents’ homes.

**Cultural influences.** Cultural influences refer to the cultural beliefs, practices and patterns that participants were exposed to, or developed while growing up. At times, cultural influences were static or unchanged, and at other times they seemed to encourage flexibility and adaptation. Sita was very candid about her connection with her Indo-Caribbean culture: “You’re born into the culture; you can’t really shake it off. It’s like all the way around you, everywhere.

I feel like it's my every being" (lines 27-30). She attributes growing up in Trinidad to teaching her to be "tolerant of each other's differences, religions and colors" (lines 46-48).

**External influences.** External influences refer to assistance, guidance and interactions with peers, experts, and teachers and other individuals via classroom, organizational and institutional interactions. Mentors formed a part of participants' external environments. For some participants, having a mentor was a new and unexpected experience; for others, it was quite positive. Anu explained that she had not experienced having a mentor before. She shared: "I've never had that experience with someone who actually just took it on themselves...I didn't know what it meant to have a mentor. I didn't realize the importance of having one either...to just have someone take on that role" (lines 106-110). Anu's mentor was an Indian woman who migrated directly from India, and true to her culture, she assumed that as the more knowledgeable person, she should fill role of a guide for Anu.

### **Mentor Influence**

Mentor influence refers to the variety of ways that mentors affected the lives of their protégés. Mentors are typically more experienced and are able to influence their protégés within any given environment or scenario. Mentors provide guidance related to work, skill acquisition, and social or emotional support (Daloz, 1999; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). Mentors who were White males or females focused on professional competence and visibility of protégés, whereas mentors who were Black, Hispanic, Black Cherokee, or Indian were far more empathetic and focused on relational bonds, empathy and expressing care and nurturance toward protégés. Mentor cross-cultural influences are reflected in the subthemes of (a) mentor qualities, (b) mentor advocacy and challenge, and (c) relationship.

**Mentor qualities.** Mentor qualities refer to the traits and behaviors that mentors exhibited toward protégés during their interactions in fields of medicine, science, technology, academic and social service. Mentors were described as supportive and nurturing, displayed good medical ethics, were interested, involved, generous, motherly, comforting, recognized, intelligent, dependable, knowledgeable and compassionate. Adversely, mentors were also hostile and unpleasant, displayed high tempers, and were sarcastic.

Arti's mentor displayed strong ambition as she focused on cutting edge trends and technologies, professional prominence in the field, and gender equality, and practiced good medical ethics, which helped Arti "cement what [she] believed in, in the first place" (line 328).

**Mentor advocacy and challenge.** Mentor advocacy refers to the encouraging and supportive roles or influences that protégés experienced with their mentors. Protégés reported how their mentors influenced, supported, and advocated for them in various ways during their tenure as undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students, and also professionally in the fields of social services, science and technology. As professionals, Kavi, Prema, Prad, Bina, Kara, and Maya found that their mentors engendered a sense of safety, understanding, support and growth through their interactions and daily involvement. Mentors served as coaches, were empathetic, taught them to prioritize, commended and recognized protégés for their successes, and empowered them to take risks and grow in their fields. Mentors' positive and encouraging actions instilled resilience and built confidence and pride in protégés.

Prema described how her mentor helped her overcome challenges that stemmed from her Caribbean background. She explained: "Growing up in Trinidad, it was like you're seen and not heard...you're not encouraged to express your feelings...you're not encouraged to do critical thinking" (lines 203-205). As a result, Prema took a long time to overcome her shyness, and this

affected her teaching, public speaking and other engagements. Eventually, with the support and encouragement of her mentor, Prema was finally able to engage as a speaker and facilitator.

Challenge refers to the adversarial attitudes that protégés perceived regarding their mentors. Participants described the struggles and sense of opposition that arose within their mentoring relationships in terms of the difficulties, confusion, aggression, antagonism, discouragement, and conflicts they experienced with mentors. Protégés explained that mentors showed aggression, were coercive, tended to be ambiguous or confusing, were discouraging or disrespectful, or displayed a lack of empathy. Such opposition formed barriers which felt overpowering, and sometimes overwhelming to protégés. Kavi, for instance, became frustrated; her mentor was constantly saying, “do this, do this, do this, [yet] I respected her so highly to the point that whenever she said jump I would say how high” (lines 145 -146). Kavi acknowledged that she frequently left work in tears because of her mentor.

**Relationship.** Relationship refers to the bonds, connections, friendships, shared values and sociability between protégés and mentors, reflected through social and cultural interactions. Participants described the shared understanding, bonds, kinship, connection, values, and social interactions that helped them to interact effectively, and in some cases, cemented their relationships into lasting friendships. Keya said, “We both understand the hardships from living in third world countries and understand that hard work brings success” (lines 27-29).

### **Knowledge Sharing**

Knowledge sharing refers to the ways that protégés obtained information through learning centered, professional or social interactions with their mentors. Protégés described how they learned from and with their mentors, and how they developed both personally and professionally. Mentors encouraged protégés to build upon their existing knowledge bases, and often, they learned or uncovered new information. Knowledge sharing was reflected in the subthemes of (a) learning and understanding (b) values, and (c) communication.

**Learning and understanding.** Learning and understanding refers to the capabilities, skills, and new knowledge that protégés developed through their mentoring relationships. Mentors helped protégés develop a sense of confidence and security, guided learning by being role models, and influenced thinking, reasoning and problem solving abilities. As a scientist, Prad learned about following proper protocols, negotiating, and handling conflict. He learned to be persuasive in negotiations and about the steps to resolving conflict, and understood the security and diplomatic challenges that existed in their field.

Mentors also shaped the professional development of protégés by building professional competence, comfort and knowledge in their fields to where they thrived, or in some cases, felt so relaxed they no longer sought promotions or professional growth. Reciprocal learning also occurred where protégés were able to share new knowledge with mentors.

**Values.** Values refer to the principles, standards and ideals that protégés came to appreciate and understand through their mentoring interactions and relationships. Participants learned about values such as acceptance and appreciation, goals, achievement and reward, continuous improvement, intrinsic or fundamental influences, strength and trust.

**Communication.** Communication refers to verbal, interpersonal exchange together with accompanying stances and accommodations that participants experienced and learned about within their mentoring relationships. Stances included the attitudes, both positive and negative, and accommodations included the responses and feedback that occurred.

Participants described the communication styles of their mentors, from whom they learned of effective communication practices they could emulate, or alternatively, of practices

they felt were inadequate, and ways to improve upon those. They learned directness from mentors' candor within verbal exchanges, and the value of feedback regarding performance of work or in response to questions asked.

Keya used feedback to improve her work; she contrasted her outlook to others who viewed feedback negatively, "as bad criticism" (line 135). Over time, protégés' communication skills improved in terms of their confidence, questioning abilities, attitude, and understanding. Although they encountered challenges at times, most were able to reconcile why they experienced conflict when communicating with mentors, and to devise ways to improve communication. Protégés gained confidence needed to make presentations to large groups; some found their voice and were able to stand up against arguments or rebuttals, and others still became confident enough to question and to seek more information to enhance their productivity.

### **Responses to Research Questions**

In this study, the mental models that participants constructed from familial relationships and interactions, scaffolded upon cultural foundations, shaped their experiences and learning (Gentner & Stevens, 1983). Because participants' educational goals and expectations were deeply ingrained, they sought mentors who could help them achieve their goals.

Protégés viewed mentor influences and shared knowledge as factors that contributed toward their successful cross-cultural mentoring relationships. On a professional level, they gained the confidence they needed to function effectively, and to thrive in their various fields. By being open and accepting to the opportunities and challenges within their mentoring relationships, participants were able to build bridges, allowing for growth, transition, and meaning making because of the connections and encouragement along the way (Kegan, 1982; Lave & Wenger, 1991). They viewed challenges as the struggles and sense of opposition that arose from mentors' adversarial attitudes and other constraints within their cross-cultural mentoring relationships.

### **Implications Academic and Professional Development**

Adult learners in the U. S. come from a multitude of racial and ethnic cultures. Cross-cultural mentoring requires an appreciation of other's beliefs, identity and culture. To create developmental relationships, mentors including faculty, advisors, religious leaders, and supervisors, and their protégés should explore each other's points of view to develop a stronger understanding of each other's needs and expectations by appreciating differences in values, beliefs, norms, or attitudes. Empathy and mutuality enables mentors and protégées to become more trusting and supportive of each other. Figure 1 suggests that a cyclical approach to cross-cultural mentoring be used so that mentors and protégés learn and grow from their relationships.

This approach suggests that ongoing open communication and assessment is needed throughout the mentoring cycle, and can be applied regardless of participants' ethnic cultures. The relationship should begin with a mutual discussion of needs and expectations. During the relationship, both mentor and protégé should openly collaborate about the relationship as well as the functional outcomes of their relationship. They should focus on regularly discussing, explaining, critiquing, empathizing and sharing their needs and concerns. In doing so, all challenges and issues are brought forward, and clarified in the spirit of ongoing improvement and open communication.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Good cross-cultural mentoring relationships require participants' willingness to acknowledge and understand the experiences of those from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). Based on this study, further research is needed to explore

the mentoring experiences of other less-visible immigrant cultures, especially from countries where there have been historical or forced migration, and multiple ethnicities as a result of tribal or clan based customs such as among Asian or other eastern nations. Exploring the mentoring needs of less visible immigrant cultures enables improved cross-cultural understandings, intercultural communication, enhanced flexibility, adaptability, unity and acceptance, awareness of differences, broader perspectives, emotional satisfaction, and increased creativity and productivity (Brinson & Kottler, 1993).

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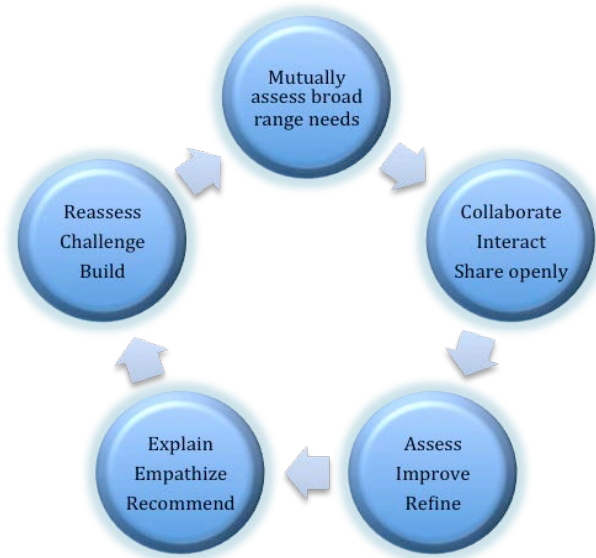


Figure 1. A cyclical approach to cross-cultural mentoring enables mentors and protégés to learn and grow from their relationships.