**Leaving egos outside: A 'reverse mentoring' study of BAME psychology students and senior university leaders**

Kathryn Waddington, Reader in Psychology, University of Westminster
tel: 020 3506 9026, email: k.waddington@westminster.ac.uk (corresponding author)
ORCID: 0000-0002-2557-0064


Deborah Husbands, Reader in Psychology, University of Westminster
tel: 020 3506 9021, email: d.husbands1@westminster.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0003-2979-5655


Bryan Bonaparte, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Westminster
tel: 020 3506 6380, email: b.bonaparte1@westminster.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0002-5976-7500

## Abstract

This Highlight article describes a small pilot study of a 'reverse mentoring' study in a UK university, involving five undergraduate Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) psychology students who mentored five senior leaders. Inverted commas were initially used to critique the term, and the associations with backward – rather than forward – direction of travel. The article will show how students were enabled and supported in their mentor role by using the concept of being 'equal thinking partners' in the mentor-mentee relationship. This allowed vulnerability, trust, shared humanity, and self-compassion to enter the mentoring space. The article presents early findings of the evaluation as work in progress, and critical reflection on the processes of 'reverse mentoring'. The study provided a foundation for further funded research into compassionate pedagogy with students as co-researchers; and imposter phenomenon among racially minoritised students. The article includes recommendations on how the concept of being equal thinking partners can be: (i) developed further in pedagogical partnerships; and (ii) extended beyond the higher education sector, to youth justice work with vulnerable and disadvantaged young people.

**Key words:** Reverse mentoring; BAME student experience; self-compassion

## Background and Context

The authors are all academic psychologists with research and practice interests in equality and diversity: Kathryn as co-chair of the university's *Equality and Progression Working Group;* Deborah as co-chair of the university's *BME Colleague Network* and lead for the university's *Black History Year Programme*; Bryan as co-chair of the non-profit social enterprise *Black Britain and Beyond.* We acknowledge the problematic usage and sensitivities surrounding language associated with race and ethnicity. The term BAME ignores differences *within* and *between* different BAME groups; BAME groups are not homogenous (Bhopal, 2020; Brown, 2021). However, when the study began prior to the pandemic in 2019, BAME was the term used in the Universities UK (UUK) report into student attainment/awarding gaps (UUK, 2019), which provided a rationale for the study. The study was part of a wider university funded research project exploring how work and organisational psychology concepts can be adapted and applied to enhance student learning gain and employability.

The specific aims of the 'reverse mentoring' study were for:

- Senior members of staff to gain deeper insight into BAME students' experiences and incorporate that insight into their practice

- Students to gain access to resources and relationships to enhance their learning gain – broadly defined as: improvement in knowledge, skills, work-readiness, and personal development made by students during their time spent in higher education (Office for Students, 2019).

Inverted commas for 'reverse mentoring' were initially used to critique the term, and evaluation interviews with mentors and mentees explored whether other terms might be more appropriate.

## Background Literature

Mentorship in higher education (HE) traditionally involves a process where the mentor, as an experienced person, guides the mentee in developing the knowledge and skills required for their professional career development (Mackh, 2020). This is not unproblematic. For example, Cross et al.'s (2019) systematic review showed barriers to mentoring caused by hierarchical/gender differences in power. Whilst Bhopal's (2020) research into the effect of mentoring on the careers of senior Black and minority ethnic women academics in the UK revealed the lack of a 'serious commitment to an equality agenda' (p. 79). Therefore, although universities may present a strong *rhetoric* of equality and diversity, this is not necessarily followed by *specific and effective* policies and procedures.

Reverse mentoring involves exchanging traditional roles of mentor/mentee and eliminating mentorship models based on notions of apprenticeship and hierarchy (Clarke et al., 2019). This is not a new concept. Jack Welch at General Electric introduced reverse mentoring in 1999 after meeting the leader of a global finance company who relied on younger hires to help him become better acquainted with recent technology (Laskowski, 2015). There is often an expectation that younger employees will have more information technology (IT) knowledge and skills – around latest trends in social media, for example – than older members of staff, which can serve as a solution to the 'IT generation gap', but is this relevant/applicable in universities? Is it appropriate/ethical to expect students to teach senior leaders how to become more digitally literate?

Morris (2017, p. 285) suggests that reverse mentoring is an 'untapped resource' in the academy but argues that it *needs go beyond* technological skills and social media. Notably, Curtis et al.'s (2021) recent research with medical students shows how reverse mentoring provided an opportunity to help staff better understand the realities faced by students in underrepresented groups (low socioeconomic backgrounds, minority groups and members of communities with protected identities). It also helped them acknowledge the responsibilities they have as staff (as well as wider faculty and university-level responsibilities) towards their students and facilitated a shift in culture away from a student deficit narrative. Reverse mentoring schemes such Curtis et al.'s provide unique opportunities for senior leaders to develop cultural literacy (Salo-Lee, 2007).

## Approach

Traditional concepts of mentoring are underpinned by theoretical frameworks based around developmental, learning, and social theories (Clarke et al., 2019). However, this mentoring scheme was part of a wider initiative exploring how work and organisational psychology concepts can be adapted and applied to enhance student learning gain and employability. Therefore, the theoretical framework here was the job demands-resources model and associated concept of job crafting (Demerouti, 2014), which is about: (i) decreasing demands (where possible); (ii) increasing

resources; and (iii) setting challenging but realistic goals. Students were encouraged to think about their studies as a 'job', and access to senior leaders as an important resource and relationship. Kline's (2009) Thinking Environment™, summarised in Table 1, provided a framework for the mentor-mentee relationship as one of equal thinking partners.

>> Insert Table 1 about here <<

Following ethical approval, BAME students were purposively invited to join the pilot study. The rationale being because the majority of new graduates in non-graduate level employment in many regions of the UK are disproportionately BAME and disabled students. These groups face particular barriers to graduate employment opportunities (Sandhu, 2021). The criteria guiding recruitment of student mentors, were that:

- we knew, and had established professional working relationships with them – e.g., as personal tutees, student representatives
- we felt confident that with briefing and support they would not be afraid to 'speak truth to power' (Gurteen, no date).

Four female and one male student were recruited, reflecting the current gender imbalance in undergraduate psychology (Johnson et al., 2020). Although a small group, their demography was rich in terms of age (early 20s to late 40s) and ethnicity (Black British, Asian, African). Putting themselves forward as participants represented their ability and courage to set themselves challenging but realistic goals (Demerouti, 2014). Four male and one female senior leader (one Asian, four White) volunteered to be mentored, reflecting the gender balance and demography of senior university leadership (at that time), and more widely in the sector (Hewitt, 2020). Their willingness to engage as equal thinking partners in the mentor-mentee relationship represented courage and vulnerability, which are attributes of compassionate leadership (Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021), and a willingness to engage in 'power listening to truth'.

A joint briefing session took place over lunch before randomised mentor-mentee matching took place (see below). This session introduced key principles and components of a thinking partnership: attention, equality, ease, and appreciation (see Table 1 above; Kline, 2009). To set the tone of being equal thinking partners everyone introduced themselves by saying: a) first name/what they preferred to be called; b) favourite food and why. The rationale for b) was to provide an opportunity for intercultural insights at an early point in the mentor-mentee relationship.

Students were given an additional briefing session to support development of their communication and reflective practice skills They also received a copy of Neff and Germer's (2018) *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* which includes resources for writing a reflective journal (see Neff, no date). Students were encouraged to share with their mentees their thinking, stories, reflections, and resources related to self-compassion, which comprise: (i) self-kindness; (ii) understanding our shared/common humanity; and (iii) mindfulness. Introductory 'ice-breaker' activities that could be used in initial mentor meetings were also suggested, for example

sharing thoughts on TED talks such as Chimamanda Adichie's '*The danger of a single story'*.

Mentor-mentee matching was done randomly by drawing 'names out of a hat'. Meetings were encouraged outside of formal environments/offices to promote equality and ease; typically, they took place in public spaces inside/outside the university. Table 2 summarises key aspects of the mentoring process.

>> Insert Table 2 about here <<

The study ran from April-July 2019, and some mentors and mentees (e.g. the Vice-Chancellor, who has given permission to be named as a mentee), continued to stay in touch after this point.

**Outcomes**

Here we present highlights from preliminary interviews with all participants as work in progress. While there was understandable nervousness on *both* sides, self-compassion played a crucial role in facilitating mentor-mentee conversations. For example, one mentor shared material from Neff and Germer (2018) with their mentee, and overall the experience was viewed positively by students and senior leaders.

**Mentors' Experience**

> *Where was I and what was I thinking when I opened the email telling me who I would be mentoring? I was on the bus and thought 'OMG! I'm mentoring the VC!'*

> *It needs to be an 'egoless' conversation, so as a student I had to leave my slightly fragile ego outside to be able to share a 'proper conversation' about the similarities and differences in our experience of growing up as men. I had always thought the grass was greener for academics, but now I think it's just cut differently.*

> *I think my mentee was a 'perfect match', there was a surprising amount of common ground* [coping with grief and loss]*, and I really appreciated how they shared their personal stories in a way that was very warm and open*

**Mentees' Experience**

> *Self-compassion provided a 'safe ground' where I could reflect on how I was the product of a privileged system, and I experienced a dawning insight into the real costs – financial and otherwise – for our BAME students and their families*

> *I really appreciated the opportunity to get out from behind my desk and 'see' aspects of student's experience at Westminster through fresh eyes – I would meet my mentor at a café near her placement which was fun!*

> *It would be helpful to know about the assumptions that other types of students hold, care leavers and disabled students for example*

When asked about appropriateness of 'reverse mentoring' terminology, it was not seen as problematic: *Why not simply call it a mentoring scheme?* [Mentee]; *What about calling it prosocial mentoring?* [Mentor]. Therefore inverted commas have been removed in the remainder of the paper.

**Concluding Reflections**

Kline's (2009) concept of being equal thinking partners in a reverse mentoring relationship highlighted that the 'equal' element does not have to assume that each party is equal in their knowledge. Rather, they are equal in their ability to reflect and share thoughts and perspectives, with mutual respect. This can facilitate an environment of psychological safety where both parties can say what is on their mind without fear of judgement or reprisal. However, for this to work a plan/road map should be shared in the form of a mentoring contract/agreement on what each party wants to achieve with the help of the other and working in partnership. Being equal thinking partners can extend into other forms of pedagogical partnership with students as co-creators of curriculum, assessment, and knowledge (Cook-Sather and Matthews, 2021). Being equal thinking partners promotes shared responsibility and ownership, creating new forms of student-teacher agency, and more democratic, inclusive, and dynamic ways of working and learning with, from, and about each other.

Reverse mentoring, when planned correctly, simply becomes an important extension of traditional mentoring, and our study supports the benefits of mentoring in HE. For reverse mentoring to work it requires commitment to embodying the roles of the mentor and mentee, to avoid the roles reverting back to a more hierarchical mentoring relationship. This reverse mentoring study provided real-time insight into shifting power dynamics between the mentors and mentees. For both roles, disruptions of positionality challenged previously held views regarding the lifeworld of participants. Albeit temporary, the liminal space of a reverse mentoring conversation facilitated authentic dialogue around impostorism (namely, a feeling of intellectual fraudulence; see Kilby, 2020).Some senior leaders shared their own feelings of impostorism, which sharply contrasted with a sense of empowerment in student mentors. Participants benefitted from an exchange of cultural literacies which, in the case of senior leaders, fed into a more informed understanding of the challenges for BAME students. Students gained a fresh understanding of the leadership territory which could be taken into future employment, with a new sense of agency and empowerment.

## What Next?

Three initiatives have arisen from this small-scale study. Firstly, the concept of being equal thinking partners informed a *Society for Research into Higher Education* funded study into compassionate pedagogy, with students as co-researchers (see Waddington and Bonaparte, 2022). Secondly, the University of Westminster's *Diversity and Inclusion Research Community* funded investigations into experiences of the impostor phenomenon in racially minoritised students in higher education (see Yetkili, Husbands and Linceviciute, 2022). Finally, one of the student mentors in this project – whose reflections on 'leaving egos outside' informed the title of this paper – now works as employability lead for a youth justice social enterprise in London. This clearly shows how reverse mentoring enhanced their knowledge, skills, work-readiness, and personal development. The principles and processes of reverse mentoring described here will now be extended beyond higher education, in a follow-up study with vulnerable and disadvantaged young people.

## Acknowledgements

## References

Adichie, C. (2009). *The danger of a single story.* Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en [Accessed 7th July 2022].

Bhopal, K. (2020). Success against the odds: The effect of mentoring on the careers of senior Black and minority ethnic academics in the UK. *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 68(1), 79-95. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2019.1581127

Brown, G. (2021). *Beyond BAME: In search of a new category*. Available at: https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/inclusion/2021/07/07/beyond-bame-in-search-of-a-new-category/ [Accessed 24th June 2023].

Clarke, A. J., Burgess, A., van Diggele, C. and Mellis, C. (2019). The role of reverse mentoring in medical education: Current insights. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 10, 693-701. https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S179303

Cook-Sather, A. and Matthews, K. E. (2021). Pedagogical partnership: Engaging with students as co-creators of curriculum, assessment and knowledge. In Hunt, L. and Chalmers, D. (eds.) *University teaching in focus: A learning-centred approach.* London: Routledge, 243-259.

Cross, M., Lee, S., Bridgman, H., Thapa, D. K., Cleary, M., & Kornhaber, R. (2019). Benefits, barriers and enablers of mentoring female health academics: An integrative review. *PLoS ONE* 14(4). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0215319

Curtis, S., Mozley, H., Langford, C. and Kelly, J. (2021). Challenging the deficit discourse in medical schools through reverse mentoring—using discourse analysis to explore staff perceptions of under-represented medical students. *BMJ Open,* 11, e054890. https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/11/12/e054890

Demerouti, E. (2014). Design your own job through job crafting. *European Psychologist,* 19(4), 237-247. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000188

Gurteen, D. (no date). *Conversational leadership habits.* Available at: https://conversational-leadership.net/speak-up/ [Accessed 28th June 2023].

Hewitt, R. (2020). *Mind the gap: gender differences in higher education*. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/07/mind-the-gap-gender-differences-in-higher-education/ [Accessed 7th July 2022].

Johnson, J., Madill, A., Koutsopoulou, G. Z., Brown, C. and Harris, R. (2020). Tackling gender imbalance in psychology. *The Psychologist.* 33, 5-6.

Kilby, L. (2020). Shaking off the shackles of impostorism. *The Psychologist,* 33, 38-41.

Kline, N. (2009). *More time to think.* London: Cassell.

Kline, N. (no date). *Time to think.* [online] Available at: https://www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment/the-ten-components/ [Accessed 19th July 2022].

Laskowski, N. (2015). Reverse mentoring turns millennials into teachers. Available at: https://www.techtarget.com/searchcio/blog/TotalCIO/Reverse-mentoring-turns-Millennials-into-teachers [Accessed 13th July 2022].

Lawton-Misra, N and Pretorius, T. (2021). Leading with heart: Academic leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. *South African Journal of Psychology.* 51(2), 205-214. https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246321992979

Mackh, B. M. (2020). Mentorship: The new master apprenticeship model in Higher Education. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice,* 20(12), 56-94.

Morris, L. V. (2017). Reverse mentoring: Untapped resource in the academy? *Innovative Higher Education*, 42, 285–287. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-017-9405-z

Neff, K, (no date). *Self-compassion journal*. Available at: https://self-compassion.org/exercise-6-self-compassion-journal/ [Accessed 25th June 2023].

Neff, K. and Germer, C. (2018). *The mindful self-compassion workbook.* New York: The Guildford Press.

Office for Students (OfS). *Learning gain.* Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/learning-gain/ [Accessed 7th July 2022].

Salo-Lee, L. (2007). Towards cultural literacy. In Kaivola, T and Melén-Paaso, M. (eds.) *Education for global responsibility – Finnish perspectives.* Finland: Ministry of Education, 74-82.

Sandhu, A. (2021). Transforming the West Midlands through reverse mentoring. [online]Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/transforming-the-west-midlands-through-reverse-mentoring/ [Accessed 13th July 2022].

Universities UK (UUK). (2019). *Black, Asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: Closing the gap.* Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-student [Accessed 26th June 2023.].

Waddington, K. and Bonaparte, B. (2022). *Developing compassionate pedagogical practices with students as co-researchers.* Available at: https://srhe.ac.uk/research/completed-award-reports/ (Research Awards – 2019) [Accessed 26th June 2023].

Yetkili, O., Husbands D. and Linceviciute, S. (2022). *'Taming my imposter': The imposter phenomenon among racially minoritised students in higher education.* Available at: https://universityofwestminster.sharepoint.com/sites/00275/SitePages/%E2%80%98Taming%20My%20Imposter%E2%80%99%20-

%20The%20Impostor%20Phenomenon%20Among%20Racially%20Minoritised%20
Students%20in%20Higher%20Education.aspx [Accessed 26th June 2023].

| Component | Attributes |
|---|---|
| Attention | Listening without interruption and with interest |
| Equality | Regarding each other as thinking peers, giving equal time to think |
| Ease | Discarding internal urgency |
| Appreciation | Noticing what is good and saying it |
| Encouragement | Giving courage to go to the unexplored edge of thinking, |
| Feelings | Welcoming the release of emotion and unexpressed feelings |
| Information | Full and accurate information and relevant facts |
| Difference | Prioritising diversity of group identities |
| Incisive questions™ | Uncovering untrue limiting assumptions |
| Place | A physical environment that says 'you matter' |

*Table 1: Components of a Thinking Environment™* Source: Kline (no date)

| Key Aspects of the Mentoring Process |
|---|
| 1. Students were trained in their role as mentors and offered supportive supervision meetings to enable them to 'speak truth to power' |
| 2. The lead author attended an introductory meeting with each mentor and mentee to clarify any issues/concerns |
| 3. Mentors and mentees met for at least 30 minutes, minimum of 3 or 4 sessions based around a negotiated contract, and principle of being equal thinking partners |
| 4. Mentors and mentees were encouraged to keep a reflective journal |
| 5. Follow up individual interviews with students and staff |

*Table 2: Key aspects of the mentoring process*