Concept Paper

Compassion-Focused Mentoring: An Antidote to Adverse Faculty-Student Mentoring Outcomes?

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Abstract

Fueled by decreased state support, economic pressures, and a growing emphasis on academic capitalism, higher education in the United States faces significant challenges. These shifts have fostered fast-paced, competitive environments, impacting the quality and equity of faculty-student mentoring in graduate programs, particularly for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and first-generation students. This article proposes a novel framework, the compassion-focused mentoring conceptual model (CFM-CM), to address the complex challenges faced by under-represented students seeking meaningful faculty mentorship. The CFM-CM expands on Johnson's model for mentor competence by integrating principles from Gilbert's compassion-focused therapy (CFT) approach. It emphasizes the cultivation of a compassionate Self-identity in mentors, grounded in compassion motivation and mindfulness, as a foundation for fostering ethical, equitable, and supportive mentoring relationships. By exploring the limitations of current mentoring practices and analyzing negative mentoring experiences through the lens of CFT, this article suggests that the CFM-CM can pave the way for improved faculty-student relationships, fostering well-being, inclusivity, and success for BIPOC and first-generation students in graduate education.

1. Compassion-Focused Mentoring: An Antidote to Adverse Faculty-Student Mentoring Outcomes?

Higher education institutions in the United States have long struggled with decreased state support, unpredictable federal research funding, and a rapidly shifting economy [1]. With the rise of academic capitalism [2], American universities, especially research-intensive ones, have gradually sponsored business-minded practices, prioritizing economic metrics over educational values. Higher education administrators have thereby strategized to reduce costs through educational outsourcing and increase tenured faculty productivity through the commercialization of research and pressure to secure external grants [3-5].

Faculty labor policies have harmed equity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education. For example, the literature shows that the quest for educational cost reductions and increased pressure on tenured faculty to adopt a business mindset have compromised student outcomes, faculty work-life balance, and shared governance, further leading to the erosion of faculty commitment, motivation, and professional identity [3-5].

Consequently, American higher education environmental climates have become increasingly fast-paced and competitive, making faculty-student graduate mentoring seem daunting. As tenured faculty navigate the pressures of academic ranking, reputation, accountability, and productivity [6], graduate mentoring relationships have also shifted into economic metrics and resource management [6]. The advent of a global knowledge economy [2] and the accentuation of higher education disparities [1] have gradually reshaped academic knowledge production, trading, and student accessibility. Under academic capitalism, faculty are driven to focus on research and entrepreneurial metrics, often to the detriment of high-quality graduate mentoring relationships [4, 5, 7].

While these shifting academic landscapes and demands undoubtedly pose obstacles for all graduate students seeking meaningful mentorship, the impact is especially acute for under-represented students. Existing power dynamics, inequalities, and ethical tensions in mentoring relationships are exacerbated for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and first-generation students, who face significant challenges in accessing education [8]. These social contexts become catalysts for adverse mentoring outcomes as well as ethical and social implications [9-11]. In fact, several ethical and social tensions have been raised in developmental relations with graduate mentees, such as power differential, racial and gender inequalities, boundary violations, competitive motivations, and mentors' self-enhancement values and behaviors [12-16].

The complex interplay of academic pressures and social identities amplifies challenges for BIPOC and first-generation students seeking meaningful mentorship, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. To navigate these dynamics effectively, exploring the ethical and social tensions inherent in mentoring relationships and designing strategies that promote equitable access to mentoring programs for all students is essential.

Conceptualized as an interpersonal phenomenon that aims to nurture well-being, meaningful mentoring is a trustworthy relationship that guides, inspires, and amplifies mentees' strengths [17, 18]. At the graduate level, faculty-student mentorship encompasses education, socialization, and professionalization, often guiding students in the academic community and future professional networks [19]. When successful, mentoring is a significant responsibility that leads to the flourishing of mentoring dyads, higher education, and communities [20].

Drawing from Johnson's triangular model of mentor competence [16, 21] and integrating Gilbert's motivational systems for interpersonal relating and compassion-focused therapy (CFT) [22-24], this article proposes a compassion-focused mentoring conceptual model (CFM-CM) [24]. Johnson's triangular model highlights essential facets of faculty competence in mentoring roles. At the foundation of the triangle lie mentor virtues such as integrity, care, prudence, and patience, while intellectual and emotional abilities and competencies acquired through training and experience form the sides of the triangle [16, 21].

The CFM-CM expands upon Johnson's framework by integrating the principles of CFT. This evidence-based psychotherapy combines Buddhist psychology, evolutionary science, and neuroscience to enhance cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic therapies [23, 25, 26]. Therefore, the CFM-CM incorporates compassion motivation and mindfulness as foundational elements for nurturing a compassionate Self-identity that drives mentoring-specific skills and competencies [16, 21, 23-26].

This article briefly reviews the mentoring literature on under-represented students' negative mentoring experiences and implications [8-13]. Next, it examines negative mentoring experiences through Gilbert's four basic psychological functions of the mind [26-28]. Finally, it proposes and discusses possible applications of the CFM conceptual model in BIPOC and first-generation graduate mentorship settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Negative Graduate Mentoring Experiences

Graduate students frequently rely on quality mentoring to navigate their academic journeys and achieve professional success [29]. Positive mentoring relationships can bolster academic satisfaction, retention, timely degree completion, and future career goals [30]. However, many students need more equitable access to high-quality and diverse mentorship programs [31, 32].

This challenge disproportionately affects underrepresented students at a higher risk of experiencing negative mentoring [31, 32]. Eby and colleagues state that negative mentoring experiences encompass unsatisfactory relationships between mentors and mentees. These experiences can range from mild shortcomings like a lack of mentor expertise or availability to more severe and intentional behaviors such as unequal treatment, abuse of power, and a lack of psychosocial support [8-11].

For instance, recent studies have highlighted that BIPOC, and first-generation graduate students often encounter faculty members who exhibit gatekeeping behaviors. These behaviors include withholding research opportunities, restricting access to funding and mentorship, impeding academic progress, and demonstrating apathy or absenteeism. Consequently, these actions can significantly impede students' engagement in research, hinder their educational and professional

development, and undermine their sense of belonging and overall success within graduate programs [12, 31, 32].

Understanding the factors contributing to negative mentoring experiences, as illustrated by the identified meta-themes by Eby et al. [9-11], is a crucial step in developing effective strategies to mitigate such experiences. In their research, the authors identified several meta-themes as follows: 1) a mismatch between mentor and mentee in terms of values, work styles, and personality traits; 2) distant behavior, which involves excluding mentees from meetings and creating a sense of detachment; 3) manipulative behavior, where mentors abuse their position of authority to exert power over mentees, potentially exploiting or sabotaging them for personal gain; 4) a lack of mentoring expertise; and 5) general dysfunctionality, which encompasses mentors' personal issues and negative attitudes [9-11].

In addition to the valuable insights provided by Eby and colleagues on negative mentoring experiences [9-11], exploring adverse outcomes in graduate mentoring further within the social context of evolutionarily mediated motivational systems is crucial. Specifically, understanding the roles of competitive, caring, and compassion motivations becomes significant in addressing the challenges faced by BIPOC and first-generation graduate students [22]. By building upon the insights offered by Eby et al. [9-11], the following section delves deeper into adverse graduate mentoring experiences, examining Gilbert's four basic psychological functions of the mind, and emphasizing the fundamental distinctions between motives, emotions, competencies, and behaviors. This exploration aims to enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics in mentoring relationships and inform strategies that promote positive and supportive outcomes [26, 27, 33].

3. Gilbert's Four Basic Psychological Functions of the Mind: Motives as Catalysts

At the core of the CFM conceptual model are Gilbert's four basic psychological functions of the mind: motives, emotions, competencies, and behaviors. Motives are crucial catalysts for psychological processes, highlighting the distinctiveness between compassion and empathy [26, 27, 33].

However, it is worth noting that despite their differences, compassion and empathy are often used interchangeably in the mentoring context. Exploring these concepts in the realm of mentoring holds dual significance. Firstly, it is essential to recognize that compassion and empathy represent distinct psychological functions within individuals, with compassion being a motive and empathy being a competency. Secondly, acknowledging that emotions, cognition, agency, and other psychological processes originate from motives provides a foundational understanding that can inform mentoring dynamics [26, 27, 33].

Furthermore, examining the motivational systems that underlie human interactions, including the evolutionary origins of competition, care, and compassion, can provide valuable insights into a wide range of biopsychosocial processes within mentoring relationships. These processes may encompass self-interest, competitiveness, cooperation, sexuality, prosocial behaviors, and ethical boundaries [22, 27, 28]. Gaining such insights can enhance mentors' awareness of their motivations in the mentoring process, facilitating the development and modeling of caring-compassion competencies and, where relevant, fostering a balanced approach to motivational systems within graduate mentoring dyads.

3.1 Motives: Competition, Caring, and Compassion

By viewing compassion as an evolutionary trait that promotes survival, mentors can appreciate its sometimes-conflicting role alongside other motivations like competitiveness. This perspective shifts the focus from static deficiencies to the fundamental origins of competitive and caring behaviors. It helps trace the development of the mental and physiological systems that enable compassion. This approach highlights how intentionally nurturing compassion can encourage prosocial behaviors [34].

In his extensive research, Gilbert explains how the fusion of 'mammalian' and 'human' brains has produced seemingly polarized capacities for prosocial and antisocial interactions. This fusion has resulted in the complex and dynamic nature of human behavior, where individuals can display altruism and love while also having the capacity for selfishness and cruelty [22, 23, 25-27, 33]. Competitive motives and social ranking are deeply ingrained in human nature, driven by innate motivations, and acquired competencies. These mechanisms serve essential survival functions such as resource-seeking but can also have negative consequences if triggered excessively or unfairly [27].

As competitive economics have grown more intense and self-centered, educational and working settings have become more competitively urgent and anxious. Compared to 40 years ago, people work more hours, feel more frustrated, and are more concerned about the future [25]. In higher education campuses, the culture of social comparison and glorifying busyness sends a message of overachievement as a measure of self-worth [18]. Overreliance on competitive motives in graduate mentoring relationships may lead to negative mentoring experiences and lasting personal and professional burdens to mentees, such as increased shame, self-criticism, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, shifting to a caring-compassionate mindset when interacting with mentees is essential to foster social connectedness and reduce the harmful effects of hyper competitiveness [23, 25].

Caring motives, deeply ingrained in human nature, have evolved over hundreds of millions of years in response to various life challenges, including reproduction and caring for offspring. These motives involve recognizing and responding to offspring's needs, such as providing food, shelter, and protection. Additionally, caring behaviors extend beyond offspring to include care for the sick, injured, and others in need, promoting survival and fostering social connections. The desire for reciprocal relationships and being seen as a desirable mate further contributes to the evolution of caring motives. Ultimately, these motives have led to the development of complex mental and physiological systems that support caring behaviors [34].

While caring motives can be found across species, compassion evolved from the unique blend of cognitive abilities and self-awareness found in humans. This "knowing intentionality" ([34], p.2) allows individuals to consciously choose to alleviate and prevent suffering, not just in themselves but also in others. It is more than just kindness or empathy; it requires courage, wisdom, and sometimes sacrifice. Understanding the three flows of compassion, that is, giving, receiving, and self-compassion, reveals its profound impact on individuals' well-being. By recognizing its diverse expressions and actively cultivating them in different contexts, mentors can tap into the transformative power of compassion to create more satisfactory and equitable mentoring experiences [26, 34-37].

3.2 Emotions

Understanding emotions in the context of graduate mentoring and the relationship between mentors and mentees can be valuable for fostering a supportive and effective mentoring environment. From an evolutionary perspective, emotions are considered adaptive responses that adjust individuals' physiology, cognition, subjective experience, facial expressions, and behavior to meet daily challenges [34]. Gilbert [34] highlights three main functions of emotions: 1) threat and harm avoidance, 2) resource seeking and acquiring, and 3) rest and connection. Emotions associated with threat and harm avoidance, such as anger, anxiety, and disgust, prepare individuals for actions of self-defense, while emotions related to resource seeking, such as excitement, motivate people to engage in behaviors that bring rewards and resources. Finally, emotions related to rest and connection, such as feelings of safeness and contentment, allow individuals to rest, digest, and connect while experiencing a sense of well-being [34].

Gilbert's approach recognizes that emotions are not singular entities but rather complex and multifaceted aspects of individuals' psychological experience, each with motives, attentional focus, thought patterns, bodily responses, action tendencies, memories, and ways of finding resolution [34]. By acknowledging the multifaceted aspects of emotions in the context of graduate mentoring, mentors can foster a positive and nurturing relationship with their mentees. This approach can help mentees develop emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-regulation skills, which are crucial for personal and professional development [16, 23]. Additionally, mentors attuned to their own emotions can model healthy emotional regulation and provide a supportive presence for their mentees, enhancing the overall mentoring experience.

3.3 Competencies: Is Empathy a Societal Panacea?

Competencies in humans involve complex thinking, conscious awareness, mentalizing, and empathy. They facilitate action, emotion regulation, and reflective functioning of how Self and others feel. When in service of compassion motivation, human competencies assist others in understanding and connecting with life experiences and being helpful toward Self and others [23, 26].

Although empathy is an indispensable component of human interactions, it could be used for any purpose (e.g., ethical, unethical, neutral). Research has shown that empathy may not be the societal panacea that many have believed. While empathy often leads to cooperation and prosocial behaviors, it can also deepen group differences, incite hostility towards others, or even lead to vicarious identification with the suffering of others [26, 38-40].

Moreover, in mentorships, mentors and mentees can be skilled in one competency but not necessarily in another. For example, a mentor may be professionally and pedagogically qualified but may need more empathy, and vice versa. Alternatively, they may practice mindfulness yet not act in helpful ways toward their or others' distress. In fact, building abilities for the various competencies that enable a compassionate self-identity in mentoring may require specialized training (e.g., empathy training, mindfulness training) and self-reflection [26, 34].

3.4 Behaviors

Behaviors are associated with one's competencies to act, and it is through action that individuals learn and develop. To this end, many change-based programs face challenges such as converting intentions and knowledge into behavioral changes [26]. Therefore, it is critical to understand what motivates empathy and behavioral actions in the mentoring dyad. For example, mentoring in competitive higher education cultures has become more about managing performance metrics and less about approachable and compassionate support while achieving educational development. Thus, some mentors may be empathic but need compassion motivation to help their mentees in non-hazardous, meaningful ways. In contrast, others have compassion motivation but lack empathy skills, which may affect mentors' behaviors in the mentoring process [26].

In summary, examining human motives, emotions, competencies, and behaviors through Gilbert's four psychological functions of the mind provides valuable insights for cultivating compassion motivation in graduate mentorships. Conceptualizing mentoring interactions through this lens can help mentors recognize how their own motivational systems, emotional responses, and competencies impact their behaviors toward mentees. It also facilitates developing self-awareness and a compassionate Self-identity necessary to foster supportive mentoring environments [34].

4. Compassion-Focused Mentoring Conceptual Model (CFM-CM)

From micro to macro levels of work, compassionate intention could be extended to a wide range of human endeavors, including the mentoring process. Building on Gilbert's CFT approach, compassion-focused mentoring delves deeper into caring behaviors that *1) address individuals' unique needs* and *2) promote their development and flourishing* [23-25].

Building upon Johnson's influential model of mentor competence, the compassion-focused mentoring conceptual model (CFM-CM) proposes a crucial shift in focus. While Johnson's model emphasizes the role of virtues like prudence, integrity, and patience [16, 21], the CFM-CM highlights the importance of compassion motivation and mindfulness as foundational elements of the mentoring process [23-25]. This shift arises from recognizing that individuals can possess virtues like prudence or patience for various motivations, not necessarily compassionate ones. For example, someone might be patient out of self-preservation rather than a genuine desire to support another's development [23-25].

The CFM-CM, drawing from Gilbert's compassion-focused therapy (CFT) approach, emphasizes that a compassionate Self-identity, fueled by compassion motivation and mindfulness, is the core foundation for effective mentoring. This model enriches Johnson's framework by prioritizing these elements, which fosters compassionate relationships and develops and enhances specific mentoring competencies. The CFM-CM emphasizes that cultivating a compassionate and mindful approach is fundamental to successful mentoring, ultimately enriching the mentor and mentee experience [16, 21, 23-25].

From the bottom up, compassion-motivation and mindfulness are in a state of interconnected balance, giving rise to a compassionate Self-identity that drives the mentoring process. Guided by the intention -To be helpful, not harmful- in all areas, the compassionate Self is cognizant that human minds may be easily influenced to act in harmful manners [24, 25].

The compassionate Self-identity becomes the foundation for mentors to acquire and strengthen well-known mentor-specific abilities and competencies (see Figure 1). For a detailed review of mentors' abilities and competencies in the mentoring relationship, please see Johnson [16, 21]. Cultivating a compassionate Self-identity in mentoring is a transformational process that encourages addressing the challenges within the mentoring dyad with warmth, acceptance, and non-judgment [24, 25].
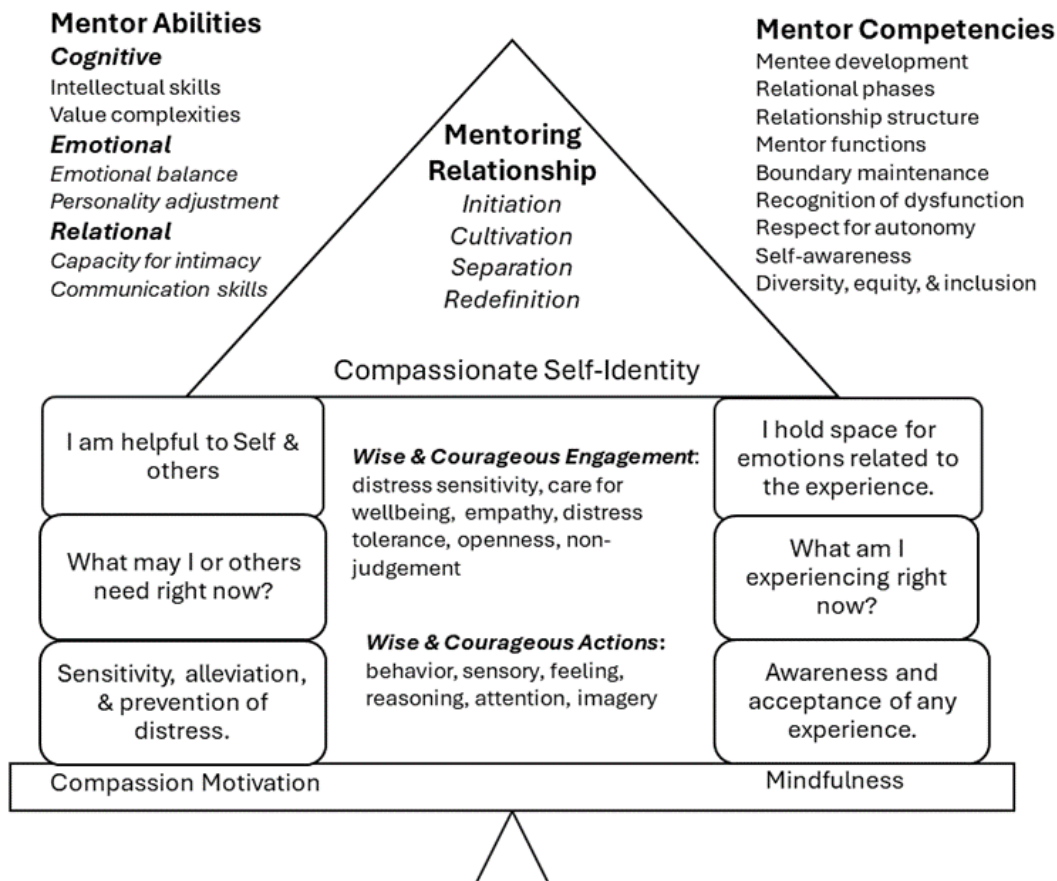

Figure 1 Compassion-Focused Mentoring Conceptual Model (CFM-CM). Compassion-Focused Mentoring Conceptual Model (CFM-CM). Built upon Johnson's Framework for Conceptualizing Competence to Mentor and Gilbert's Compassion-Focused Therapy [16, 21, 22, 24].

Building on this notion, understanding the relationship between mindfulness and compassion is crucial to developing a compassionate Self-identity in mentorship. While Western research has traditionally treated compassion and mindfulness as separate processes, they are viewed as interdependent in the CFM conceptual model. This means being sensitive to what arises in the mind and discerning how to work with the mind's content in a helpful and not harmful way [26, 41]. Without compassion, mindfulness may become an activity that only focuses on the concept of well-being. On the other hand, without mindfulness, compassion can lead to emotional weariness and burnout [24, 42].

Furthermore, whereas compassion-motivation is defined as sensitivity to, alleviation, and prevention of general distress [23], mindfulness is awareness and acceptance of any experience that may arise- good, harmful, or neutral [43]. For example, mentors and mentees may be aware of being

overworked and burnt out- a type of distress- and hold nonjudgmental space for such experience; however, if competitive rather than compassion is the dominating motive, they may opt to just power through, characterizing unhelpful action.

On the other hand, mentors and mentees may adopt a compassion motivation stance - being helpful, not harmful - but underdeveloped mindfulness may limit their ability to identify distress in themselves and others (e.g., toxic positivity; dismissive behaviors) [24]. Another example of compassion without mindfulness in the mentoring dyad would be a mentor being sensitive to a mentee's challenges but unable to direct their attention (*mindfulness*) and act on what is helpful to the mentee. This process could lead to mentor over-identification, feelings of helplessness, and burnout [26].

Cultivating a compassionate Self-identity in mentorships can benefit mentors and mentees in enhancing working alliances and improving coping strategies when addressing potential problems in the mentoring process [24]. Such identity can be cultivated by integrating Gilbert's Compassionate Mind Training (CMT), in which mentors learn how to develop and align compassion-motivation and mindfulness through cultivating compassionate thoughts towards oneself and others, addressing self-criticism with self-compassion, and engaging in compassionate behaviors [44].

At the core of the CFT approach, CMT was created to enhance the psychological well-being of individuals in psychotherapy [44]. However, it has been effectively modified to serve as a framework for improving the overall well-being of general populations, including employees, teams, and organizations in various sectors such as healthcare, social care, business, and education [45-48].

By leveraging these tools, mentors can strengthen their ability to cultivate and utilize compassion-focused competencies for effective engagement and action in mentoring relationships. Building upon the understanding of the benefits and development of a compassionate Self-identity [23, 26], the next section explores how the CFM conceptual model can be applied within the context of competitive, caring, and compassionate motivational systems. This exploration will delve into how the model can help mitigate negative mentoring experiences.

4.1 Applied Compassion-Focused Competencies for Engagement & Action in Mentoring

Drawing on Gilbert's motivational systems for interpersonal relating [27, 34], Table 1 non-exhaustively describes the purpose of two selected motivational systems - competing and social ranking, and caring and compassion. These systems are significantly influenced by social contexts and play a vital role in social life, affecting various aspects of personality [27, 34]. It also shows examples from research on negative graduate mentoring experiences in the form of unhelpful and helpful mentor behaviors and possible outcomes for mentees.

Table 1 Motivational Systems for Interpersonal Relating in Mentoring.

Motivational System	*Purpose*	*Unhelpful Mentor Behaviors*	*Unhelpful Mentees' Outcomes*	*Helpful Mentor Behaviors*	*Helpful Mentees Outcomes*
Competing & Social Ranking	Motives and competencies to engage others in contest/conflict interactions for resources [27].	Competing for revenue-generating programs [1, 2, 4, 5, 16]. Abuse of power, social rank, or position. Power over BIPOC and non-BIPOC mentees for personal gain [12, 13, 49]. Favoritism and unequal treatment Race lighting and gatekeeping [12, 13, 49]. Engage in abusive supervision and incivility. Harshly reprimand and threaten to replace mentees. Refrain from trusting mentees' capability to work with equipment data, techniques, or samples [13].	Mentees may experience defeat states, anxiety, shame, self-criticism, fear, and dysphoria [27]. BIPOC mentees may question their knowledge, place, and worth within doctoral programs [49-51]. Mentees feel taken advantage of, intimidated, unmotivated, insulted, threatened, anxious, and depressed [13, 14, 50, 51].	Approach mentoring relationships through the lens of mutual respect. Help mentees gain access to academic or professional networks. Help mentees conceptualize short- and long-term career goals [13, 47].	Assertiveness, social confidence, and excitement with social success. [27,52, 53].
Caring & Compassion	Motives and competencies to	Do not provide mentees with psychosocial	Lack of "good enough" ([54], p.311) caring	Demonstrate interest in the welfare of mentees	"Good enough" ([54], p.311) caring and

protect, rescue, support, help, and nurture the growth and flourishing of Self and others. Receptiveness to support and care from others [27].	support, "good enough" ([54], p.311) guidance, encouragement, and approachability. Poor professional boundaries. Lack of interpersonal closeness, responsiveness, and reciprocity [13].	and nurturing in the mentoring relationship could lead to mentees feeling regretful, anxious, isolated, invalidated, "not good enough," ([18], p.108) or that the mentor does not care about them [13, 14, 50, 51].	along with prosocial behaviors. Sensitivity to mentees' psychosocial needs and efforts to help mentees meet those needs. Interpersonal guidance and emotional support. Cultivate mentees' confidence, and engaging in problem-solving [13, 47, 50].	compassionate mentoring relationships can promote a sense of safeness, reassurance, belonging, interpersonal closeness, connection, and personal and professional affirmation in mentees [13, 27, 50].

When social contexts overstimulate some systems in favor of others (e.g., hyper-competitiveness, overachievement), unhelpful interactions may unfold with implications in social relations and physical and mental health. Understanding these motivational systems and their complex dynamics may deepen insight into mentors' and mentees' intersubjective experiences and the unhelpful interactions characteristic of negative mentoring relationships [10, 23, 25, 26, 29, 33].

One of the most familiar social mentalities in fast-paced higher education institutions is the competing and social ranking motivational system, in which mentoring relationships may be perceived as intimidating. In the social context of academic capitalism, for example, it promotes or even demands in-groups and out-groups' resource-seeking and competing for revenue-generating programs, global trading of knowledge-innovation, and tenure promotions based on grant writing success [1, 2, 4, 5, 16].

Alongside the pressures of academic capitalism, competing and social ranking motives can be accentuated by individual beliefs and systemic discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping. In graduate mentoring relationships, this could be exemplified by "gatekeeping behaviors" (e.g., limiting BIPOC mentees access to resources, suggesting that a mentee's successes are due to luck; downplaying or ignoring BIPOC mentees' accomplishments) [31, 32, 49, 50].

4.2 Addressing Unhelpful Interactions through Compassion-Focused Mentoring

Further exploring Table 1, both motivational systems, when over or under stimulated by biopsychosocial contexts, can generate unhelpful and helpful mentoring experiences [25, 34]. For example, in an over stimulated competing and social ranking motivational system, unhelpful mentoring interactions correspond to the specific findings in the negative mentoring experiences literature, such as abuse of power, taking credit for student work or ideas, power over BIPOC mentees for personal gain, favoritism, and unequal treatment based on mentees' gender and choice of career path; and gaslighting [12, 13, 49]. On the other hand, a hypo-activated caring and compassion motivation system may lead to unhelpful mentoring interactions, such as a lack of psychosocial support, guidance, encouragement, approachability, interpersonal closeness, responsiveness, and reciprocity [13].

Even when ranking and competitive motivational systems are not under systemic pressure, an underdeveloped compassionate Self-identity may lead mentors to focus on what is unhelpful, resulting in unskilled reasoning, feeling, and behaving [25, 26]. In using the compassion-focused mentoring conceptual model, mentors can exercise compassion-focused competencies that inform mentoring functions, relationship structure, and boundary maintenance [16]. For instance, they can focus their attention by tuning into Self and the mentoring relationship and reflecting on their motives, needs, boundary violation cues, and harmful behaviors. Moreover, mentors can benefit from reflecting and consulting with trusted colleagues about inner motivations, mentoring concerns, and biases in the social context of higher education [16, 25].

4.3 Compassionate Engagement in Mentoring: Listening

Compassionate listening is crucial in addressing negative mentoring experiences across motivational systems. Through compassionate listening, mentors can mitigate the risks of mentoring on autopilot, as it requires slowing down, becoming curious about mentees' challenges

and concerns, and being sensitive and nonjudgmental to mentees' context without being overtaken emotionally [23, 55-57].

Whether graduate mentoring focuses on psychosocial support, career and education development, or both, compassionate listening can help mentees create an emotional resonance that soothes the nervous system, leading to optimal learning states and emotional regulation [23, 55-57]. It involves compassion-focused competencies for engagement in mentoring, such as sensitivity, care for well-being, empathy, distress tolerance, openness, and non-judgment [23]. Compassionate listening can provide psychosocial support, encouragement, and approachability in the mentoring relationship. This process goes beyond active listening and assists another person in emptying their heart [43] without the urge to fix the situation.

The compassionate listening process involves:

1. being fully present and bearing witness to the mentee's felt experience (*sensitivity, empathy, distress tolerance*) [23, 57].
2. the genuine desire to learn more about the mentee through nonjudgmental, open-ended questions (*care for well-being; openness; non-judgment)* [23, 57].
3. meaning making of life experiences as part of the human condition and how they may affect the mentee (*care for well-being, openness, non-judgment*) [23, 57].

In fast-paced higher education environments, slowing down and bearing witness to mentees' felt experiences can help mentors engage with mentees' emotional difficulties while maintaining their mentor functions. Instead of reacting in polarized ways - either offering unrestrained support or completely withdrawing support- compassionate listening can assist mentors and mentees in turning towards the difficulties interfering with the mentoring process and outcomes and finding new perspectives and solutions [23, 57].

4.4 Compassionate Action in Mentoring: Being Helpful

When applied in the service of compassion, complex insightful reasoning, and problem-solving give rise to understanding the nature of the challenges in the mentoring relationship, which guides methods of coping, alleviating, and preventing them. Training in compassion-focused competencies for engagement and action in mentoring, such as *focusing attention on what is helpful to Self and others*, can assist mentors and mentees in exploring the origins of unhelpful interactions (e.g., fear, perfectionism, emotional unavailability, time constraints), brainstorming helpful possibilities, and acting in helpful ways, while attending to mentoring relationship structure, functions, and boundary maintenance [16, 26].

Integrating body, mind, and emotional awareness *(sensory)* on how those unhelpful interactions may negatively impact mentors' and mentees' health and mental health may bring further insight into dysfunctional behaviors and limiting beliefs *(reasoning)* interfering with the mentoring process. These competencies are the foundation for the compassion attributes of commitment to be sensitive to distress in Self and others and wisdom and courage in understanding and acting [23, 26].

5. Conclusion and Future Recommendations

Drawing on Johnson's framework for conceptualizing competence to mentor, Gilbert's motivational systems for interpersonal relating, and compassion-focused therapy, this article

explored the challenges and complexities of graduate mentoring relationships within competitive higher education environments.

In discussing the impact of negative mentoring experiences on mentoring dyads and overall organizational cultures, we propose that developing a compassionate Self-identity in mentorship has the potential to mitigate negative mentoring experiences and their ethical and social implications. It is essential to continue to build on current knowledge and practices in mentorship to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for all individuals involved.

Further research recommendations include a) exploring the impact of motivational systems for interpersonal relating on higher education culture and policies, mentoring relationships and experiences, and b) exploring the effectiveness of compassion-focused mentoring training programs as a potential solution to negative mentoring experiences in higher education settings.

Author Contributions

The author did all the research work of this study.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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