Case #1: Is it Okay to Ask???
Last year I worked with a postdoc who has since left to take a faculty position. We all valued her input and I think that she had a positive experience working with our research team, but there are a few questions that still linger in my mind. This particular postdoc was an African-American woman. I wondered how she felt about being the only African-American woman in our research group. In fact, she was the only African American woman in our entire department. I wanted to ask her how she felt, but I worried it might be insensitive or politically incorrect to do so. I never asked. I still wonder how she felt and how those feelings may have impacted her experience, but I could never figure out how to broach the subject.

Questions for Discussion:
1. What are the main themes raised in this case study?
2. What might the mentor’s intent have been in asking the question, and what might the impact be on the mentee?
3. How might you react to this case differently if the mentee was the only openly gay postdoc in the department? How do you engage in such conversations based on interest without feeling or expressing a sense of judgment about differences? How do you ask without raising issues of tokenism?

Case #2: How Long to Wait?
A new post-doctoral fellow, Dr. Smith, recently started working with you on a research study evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention being implemented in a local medical center. While his initial progress has been good and he always makes your scheduled meetings, you are bothered that you seldom see him in the office. When you ask him about it he explains that he is a single parent with two young children. He doesn’t have family nearby to help with childcare, and given his school debt, can’t afford full-time help. Thus, he often works from home and after the kids are in bed at night. You say nothing more at the time, but feel uncomfortable that you don’t have the opportunity for more informal contact and supervision, and don’t have experience working with someone in this situation. Then, the following week Dr. Smith brought his kids with him to a meeting with your research team, explaining that his sitter wasn’t available that day. The kids were a little distracting, though not disruptive, and the team members truly didn’t seem to mind. However, you wonder if you need to have a talk with your mentee or if you are being overly concerned about something that is not really an issue and should wait to see how things play out.

Questions for Discussion:
1. What are the main themes raised in this case study?
2. How do you picture Dr. Smith and does his image impact your reaction? If you picture him as white and American, would you react any differently if he were a minority or international student? Do you assume he is straight or gay? Would you react differently if he were a female?
3. To what extent do you expect your mentees to conform to your own professional expectations and to what extent do you alter your own expectations to accommodate theirs? Is class a factor in this case?
4. How does this situation align (or not) with your compact expectations?
5. List three concrete strategies for dealing with this issue.
Case #3: Second Language
Dr. Ellen Hlavek is a senior post-doc in your laboratory. She has an excellent training record and has had strong mentoring in research. Although her knowledge of the science and research methodology is sound, she struggles with oral presentations as English is not her first language. Recently while giving an important presentation on her research at a professional meeting, someone in the audience commented that she needed to speak slower because he couldn’t understand her. Dr. Hlavek was embarrassed and became very self-conscious. Her Slavic accent became more apparent and she started speaking even faster. She also wondered afterwards if her headscarf influenced the public criticism she received.

Questions for Discussion:
1. What are the main themes raised in this case study?
2. Dr. Hlavek calls you after this presentation. She is very upset about what transpired at the conference and shares her concerns about why she may have been singled out. As her mentor how do you advise her?
3. What are the implications of connections between religion ethnicity and language? What are the challenges for a mentor when a mentee’s second language skills present a barrier to effective communication of his/her research?