All Things Considered: Examining Mentoring Relationships Between White Mentors and Black Youth in Community-Based Youth Mentoring Programs

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Abstract

Background Community-based youth mentoring programs are popular interventions that serve a large number of Black youths throughout the country. Interestingly, the majority of mentors who volunteer their time for mentoring organizations identify as non-Hispanic White. This study examines how White mentors address topics acknowledging ethnic/racial identity and issues centered around social justice and recognize their own privileges when mentoring Black youth in community-based youth mentoring programs.

Objective The aims of the current study were to examine: (a) whether and how White volunteer mentors address ethnic/racial identity, racial socialization, and oppression in the mentoring relationship and (b) how White mentors’ awareness of their own positionality and privilege impacted how they addressed ethnic/racial identity, racial socialization, and oppression in the mentoring relationship with Black youth.

Method Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 current and former mentors from six different Big Brothers Big Sisters community-based mentoring programs across the United States.

Results Findings reveal that some mentors felt uncomfortable discussing issues centered around race and others do not think it is relevant at all. Further, findings demonstrated that mentoring Black youth significantly impacts mentors’ perceived awareness of social issues and acknowledgment of privileges they hold.

Conclusions Current findings highlight the need for youth mentoring programs to provide training and resources to help White mentors discuss implications of race and broader social justice issues with the Black youth they mentor.

Keywords Youth mentoring · Cross-racial mentoring relationships · Black youth · Privilege · Social justice
Introduction

Community-based mentoring programs have been a popular intervention for marginalized youth in urban areas in the United States since the early 1900’s (Baker & Maguire, 2005; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Despite their positive impacts (DuBois et al., 2002, 2011; Raposa et al., 2019), traditional approaches to community-based youth mentoring are limited in that selected mentors are often disconnected from the communities and backgrounds of their mentees (Albright et al., 2017; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). This is an especially important consideration for Black youth as they make up the largest racial demographic of youth in mentoring programs in the United States (Albright et al., 2017; Garringer et al., 2017). Interestingly, non-Hispanic White mentors make up the largest demographic of volunteer mentors in community-based programs. Further, consideration of race, ethnicity, and culture in cross-racial youth mentoring relationships are especially important for Black youth as they have unique contexts and cultural strengths that influence their developmental trajectory (Alexander, 2011; Delgado et al., 2017; García Coll et al., 1996; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Sánchez et al., 2014; Spencer et al., 1997). Thus, many questions remain regarding how White mentors address culturally relevant issues that occur in the lives of Black youth, especially those from economically disenfranchised communities (Albright et al., 2017; Sánchez et al., 2018; Travis & Leech, 2014).

Importance of Considering Race, Ethnicity and Culture in Mentoring Programs for Black Youth

Race, ethnicity, and culture are important to consider in mentoring relationships with Black youth and families for a number of reasons. First, Black youth and families grapple with both historical and current injustices in their environment, such as the school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, police brutality, and various other forms of racism (Alexander, 2011; Delgado et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2022; Spencer, 2017). Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) outlines how the lack of resources in a youth’s community can make them more vulnerable leading them to engage in maladaptive coping behaviors which in turn impacts their outcomes in life (Spencer, 2006, 2017). Further, the Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children illustrates societal and interpersonal factors such as prejudice, discrimination, racism, segregation, and oppression are constantly looming in the lives of Black youth as well (García Coll et al., 1996).

In fact, previous research suggests some White mentors may begin their interactions with Black youth with preconceived notions about them and their background, specifically endorsing negative stereotypes (e.g., being prone to violence; Hughes et al., 2009; Priest et al., 2018). Other youth mentoring literature has highlighted that mentors may bring negative views of families living in poverty into the mentoring relationship (Spencer et al., 2022). These findings may illustrate why previous literature has highlighted difficulties in bridging cultural differences between mentors and youth, which can lead to early termination of the youth mentoring relationship (Spencer, 2007). Further, previous literature indicates mentors with lower multicultural competence reported lower mentor satisfaction in the mentoring relationship (Suffrin et al., 2016). Overall, it is unclear how community-based youth mentors, specifically White mentors, consider the
unique experiences and barriers Black youth face while also grappling with their own biases and privileges as well (Sánchez et al., 2014, 2018).

Although Black youth contend with a variety of different environmental and systemic hurdles, they can draw upon unique cultural resources for motivation, strength, and joy (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Jones & Neblett, 2017; Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). Specifically, research has highlighted that ethnic/racial identity (e.g., private regard/pride) has been shown to buffer against the deleterious effects of racial discrimination and promote positive developmental outcomes for Black youth (e.g., academic achievement; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Seaton & Iida, 2019; Seaton et al., 2009; Sellers et al., 2006). Further, the families and communities of Black youth are a strong protective factor by providing social support (e.g., religious support) and positive racial socialization messages (Brown, 2008; Brown & Tylka, 2011; Cooper et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2001). Additionally, researchers have found that focusing on the cultural strengths and values of Black youth can also prevent detrimental outcomes and promote positive youth development (Grills et al., 2016; Jones & Neblett, 2016; Neblett et al., 2010). Specifically, capitalizing on assets already present in a youth’s social network and broader community can combat against structural oppression and discrimination against youth (Yosso, 2005).

To date, limited research has examined how White mentors cultivate the racial identity of Black youth and utilize the youth’s cultural assets in a cross-racial mentoring relationship. The consideration of how culture, racial, and ethnic issues is important in youth mentoring research because many of the existing youth mentoring frameworks do not explicitly highlight the potential implications of these constructs on the mentoring relationship (Sánchez et al., 2018; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). For example, the ways in which racism and racial identity impact rapport building between youth and their mentors is not explicitly mentioned in the most influential youth mentoring frameworks (see Rhodes, 2005; Spencer, 2006). An emerging body of literature has called for research that considers the role of race, culture, racism, and social justice in youth mentoring relationships (Sánchez et al., 2018, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2016; Weiston-Serdan, 2017).

Interracial Interactions Outside of the Youth Mentoring Context

Although there are gaps in the youth mentoring literature regarding how race, ethnicity, and culture impact the interactions between White mentors and Black youth, other research areas and disciplines have examined the implications of cross-racial/ethnic interactions. Specifically, intergroup contact theory proposes individuals who engage in some type of contact with people with different identities than their own (i.e., becoming friends with someone of a different racial/ethnic group membership) are less likely to be prejudiced towards individuals that do not share their group status (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Davies et al., 2011; Dovidio et al., 2003). In order to achieve successful intergroup contact several conditions have to be established: common goals between the individuals in different groups, relatively equal status, cooperative interdependence, the development of intergroup friendships, opportunity for personal acquaintance, and official endorsement of the contact (Dovidio et al., 2003; Kerssen-Griep & Eifler, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Research indicates that successful intergroup contact between non-Black people and Black people can have a variety of different benefits for non-Black individuals including increased empathy, respect, tolerance, and overall reduction of racial bias (Kerssen-Griep & Eifler, 2008; Onyeador et al., 2020). Intergroup contact theory highlights the importance of examining the interactions in cross-racial mentoring relationships, particularly
among Black youth and White mentors. Specifically, more research is needed to examine how interactions within cross-racial mentoring relationships impact the discussion of certain topics (e.g., social justice or cultural activities), communications between mentors and mentees, and how these interactions have lasting impacts on mentors.

The Current Study

The current study is part of a larger investigation that examined non-Black mentors’ perceptions of potential precursors of change to promote positive youth development among Black youth in community-based mentoring programs. The current study focuses on: (a) whether and how White volunteer mentors address ethnic/racial identity, racial socialization, and oppression in the mentoring relationship and (b) how White mentors’ awareness of their own positionality and privilege impacted how they addressed ethnic/racial identity, racial socialization, and oppression in the mentoring relationship with Black youth. Based on the previous youth mentoring literature we could expect to find: (a) Some White mentors may not address or be uncomfortable addressing ethnic/racial identity, racial socialization, and oppression in the mentoring relationship and (b) White mentors’ awareness of their own positionality and privilege will impact how they address ethnic/racial identity and racial socialization in the mentoring relationship. Nevertheless, this study highlights an understudied area in youth mentoring literature and a priori expectations and assumptions were considered through utilizing the constructivist grounded theory approach.

Method

Participants

The target research participants for this investigation were former and current volunteer Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) mentors who have worked with Black youth in a mentoring capacity. The reasoning for selecting these participants refers to the fact that they are highly qualified informants, capable of providing a unique understanding their interactions with Black youth in community-based mentoring programs. BBBS was the target agency of this study due its current and historical impact, and the demographics of the youth served (Porzig, 2021). Participants were mentors from the following agencies: BBBS Central Texas, BBBS of Alaska, BBBS in Winston Salem, BBBS of Flint and Genesee County, BBBS of Greater Chattanooga and BBBS of Southwestern Illinois. All mentors were at least 18 years of age at the time of the study and served at least 6 months as BBBS mentors, after completion of their initial mentorship training. Given the conditions of the global COVID-19 pandemic during the duration of the data collection (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020), all data collection was conducted exclusively via video calling (i.e., Zoom) and phone calls.

To participate in this study, prospective mentors had to fulfill the following criteria: (a) being a former or current BBBS mentor, (b) being 18 years of age or older at the time of the study, (c) having served as BBBS mentor for at least one successful mentoring experience as defined by BBBS standards for at least one Black youth, (d) having served as mentor for a minimum of 6 months, and (e) expressing willingness to consent to participate in the study, as well as completion of one in-depth, semi-structured individual interview regarding their experiences and insights on mentoring Black youth.
Prospective mentors were excluded if any of the following criteria applied: (a) failure to meet all inclusion criteria, (b) involuntary termination by BBBS, or (c) mentors identify as Black or African American. These criteria were applied for several reasons. First, according to empirical studies, youth mentoring relationships that last 3 months or less or are terminated before the expected time commitment, are not as effective for producing positive youth outcomes and can even be harmful for the youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Grossman et al., 2012). Second, mentors who were involuntarily released from their mentoring duties were not recruited because their perceptions of the mentoring process may be negatively influenced due to biases associated with the cause that led to their forced removal from the mentoring program. The authors had no competing interests with any of the participating BBBS agencies and mentors.

Demographic information was collected for each participant (see Table 1). There were 26 participants in this study. While all participants identified as White, two of the participants also identified as Hispanic, and one participant also identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native. There were slightly more male participants (53.8%) compared to female participants (46.1%). Participants between the ages of 45 and 54 comprised the largest age

| Ethnicity                        | n  | %   |
|---------------------------------|----|-----|
| Hispanic race                   | 2  | 7.7 |
| Non-Hispanic white              | 24 | 100.0 |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | 1 | 3.8 |

| Gender                          | n  | %   |
|---------------------------------|----|-----|
| Male                            | 14 | 53.8 |
| Female                          | 12 | 46.1 |

| Age range                  | n  | %   |
|----------------------------|----|-----|
| 18–24                      | 1  | 3.8 |
| 25–34                      | 4  | 15.3 |
| 35–44                      | 5  | 19.2 |
| 45–54                      | 10 | 38.4 |
| 55–64                      | 2  | 7.6 |
| 65–74                      | 4  | 15.3 |

| Education level             | n  | %   |
|-----------------------------|----|-----|
| Graduated 2-years college   | 1  | 3.57 |
| Graduated 4-years college   | 20 | 71.43 |
| Post graduate degree        | 5  | 25.00 |

| Marital status              | n  | %   |
|-----------------------------|----|-----|
| Single, never married       | 8  | 30.7 |
| Married or domestic partnership | 16 | 61.5 |
| Divorced                    | 2  | 7.6 |

| Years of experience working with Black youth as a mentor for BBBS? | n  | %   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
| 6 months to 2 years                                              | 4  | 15.3 |
| 2–5 years                                                        | 9  | 34.6 |
| 5–10 years                                                       | 5  | 19.2 |
| 10+ years                                                        | 8  | 30.7 |
group (38.4%). The majority of mentors in this study reported graduating from a 4 years college (71.4%). Sixteen mentors reported being married at the time of the study, while 10 mentors reported being single, never married and two mentors reported being divorced. All but four mentors reported having more than 2 years of experience of mentoring a Black youth as a volunteer for BBBS in their respective agency. Seventeen of the participants were current or former mentors in BBBS of Central Texas. Of the remaining mentors four were from BBBS of Alaska, three were volunteers of BBBS in Winston Salem, two volunteered for BBBS of Flint and Genesee County, one volunteered for BBBS of Greater Chattanooga and one BBBS of Southwestern Illinois respectively. Twenty-four out of 26 mentors reported having more than 2 years of experience of mentoring a Black youth as a volunteer for BBBS in their respective agency. Thirteen of the mentors were not currently engaged in BBBS mentoring relationships with a Black youth and three of those mentors had relationships that ended over 10 years ago.

Procedure and Measures

Based on the nature of this study, community stakeholders were critical in the implementation of all research procedures. Initial study participants were recruited with the help of BBBS of Central Texas administrative staff during 2020 and the beginning of 2021. Specifically, the first author met with the program administrators of BBBS of Central Texas during the spring of 2020 to discuss their study idea and their desire to interview BBBS mentors. After gaining the program administrator’s approval of the study, the first author submitted the study IRB. Once the IRB was approved, the BBBS of Central Texas staff then helped distribute a recruitment flyer to current and past mentors who identify as White and mentored Black youth in BBBS.

To increase regional diversity of the research participants, the first author then utilized a youth mentoring listserv to branch out to find more BBBS mentors across the country by distributing a recruitment flyer via email. In this listserv, the first author connected with White mentors who have mentored Black youth with BBBS. Further, the first author also connected with BBBS staff in the listserv who passed along the recruitment flyer to White mentors in their respective chapters as well. In total, 17 mentors were recruited via the assistance of BBBS of Central Texas administrative staff and 9 were recruited via BBBS staff and BBBS mentors contacted through the youth mentoring research listserv.

The primary method of data collection consisted of in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews conducted with research participants. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the study aims of a larger investigation focused on the potential precursors of change for Black youth in community-based mentoring programs. The guide began with a series of questions focused on the mentor’s background. Specifically, their motivations to become a mentor, their first experiences with their mentee, and their exposure to racially diverse populations, particularly Black youth, before becoming a volunteer mentor. After establishing focusing on the mentor’s background, questions were asked about how race and culture were addressed in the mentoring relationship. Once race and culture were addressed, questions then focused on oppression, and racial socialization. The questions then shifted to asking about privilege and color blindness awareness. These questions explored how mentors addressed issues related to white privilege, color blindness, and what the mentors potentially learned about their own biases while mentoring a Black youth. The final category of questions focused on how mentors interacted with their mentee’s social networks. The interview ended with reflective questions about significant
takeaways from the mentoring experience and suggestions on how to improve the mentoring experience with BBBS.

The first author engaged in key activities to enhance credibility which included close engagement with study participants such as: (a) debriefing with mentors and mentoring experts about emerging findings, (b) writing reflective journaling and engaging in analytic memoing, and (c) conducting a round of member checks prior to writing the final research findings (Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Thus, research participants had a key role in establishing trustworthiness of the data and ensuring the accuracy of findings. Further, a unique action to increase credibility in this study was to review the interview guide with the administrative staff of BBBS of Central Texas. Reviewing the study guide with BBBS administration allowed for certain questions to be refined and non-essential questions to be removed from the interview guide.

All participants were offered the opportunity for phone interviews instead of video calls. Each individual interview lasted between 60 and 120 min and all participants were compensated $20 for their participation and were allowed to withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty. The authors received no external funding to provide financial support for the study. Interviews commenced only once IRB approval was granted and verbal consent was provided by the study participants. Once the data was collected and analyzed, twelve mentors and two BBBS mentoring program administrators participated in member checking meetings. The member checking meetings included having a follow up meeting with the first author to have the major themes and framework created from the study presented to them to provide feedback and suggestions. The final interview transcripts were not returned to participants for correction.

**Data Analysis**

The transcriptions of the audio recordings of all interviews were verified by the first author listening to each audio recording, making any necessary corrections, and anonymizing each interview in the Otter transcription software (Corrente & Bourgeault, 2022). Data were analyzed according to the principles of constructivist grounded theory solely by the first author (CGT, Charmaz, 2006, 2014) while utilizing NVivo software (Bazeley, 2007). This grounded theory approach acknowledges the role of the researcher in the process of co-creation of knowledge by incorporating the researchers’ worldviews and perspectives, as a complement to the main focus of the research process which are the participants’ life experiences (Rieger, 2019; Timonen et al., 2018). Thus, the first author practiced reflexivity by memoing insights and takeaways after each interview and by constantly checking in with coauthors throughout the data analysis process to examine how their identities as a Black male and former mentor were impacting his perceptions of the data (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The first author’s reflexive process of examining their own beliefs throughout the research process through memoing and processing interviews with other members of the research team was essential considering the first author was a doctoral candidate at the time of the study who was leading a qualitative research project for the first time.

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection to align with the CGT approach, thus memoing and coding began after the first interview was conducted (Timonen et al., 2018). Coding was conducted solely by the first author and consisted of two major phases: (a) initial and (b) focused coding, while relying on the constant comparative method to ensure that personal biases were identified in the coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Rieger, 2019; Timonen et al., 2018). Initial coding consisted of analyzing the data
idea-by-idea as presented by research participants and utilizing “in vivo” coding, when possible, to highlight the participants’ words when coding the data. Specifically, initial coding consisted of analyzing how mentors acknowledged and addressed their mentee’s racial and cultural identity throughout the relationship, how mentors discussed issues related to oppression and social justice throughout the relationship, and how mentors were cognizant of how their own identities and privileges impacted their interactions with their mentee. Focused coding consisted of the identification of major themes and sub-themes from the initial coding of mentors’ experiences discussing race, oppression, and reflecting on their own positionality as a mentor. Data was categorized to be the most representative of the participants’ experiences and beliefs. In essence, through focused coding, large amounts of data were synthesized into a coherent framework (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Rieger, 2019). The first author utilized the memos written throughout the entire research study to connect categories and themes to create the final framework. Theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews and five more interviews were conducted to check for outlier themes. Pseudonyms were randomly selected for each participant by the first author.

Positionality Statement

Considering this study utilized CGT, the first author’s intersecting identities and the time period the study took place had a profound impact on the data collection and data analysis of the study. As a Black man raised in the southern geographic region of the United States, with extensive experience working with youth as a mentor and mental health clinician, this qualitative investigation originated from the desire to learn more about how non-Black mentors were serving Black youth. Further, this study occurred after the racial justice protests that occurred after the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and countless others during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the United States Presidential election in 2020 also impacted the data collection and data analysis. Specifically, many participants shared how these events impacted their mentees and sparked reflection on their mentoring experiences with Black youth. Thus, memo writing was essential throughout data collection and data analysis and helped the interviewer to keep track of their initial reactions and to practice reflexivity throughout the entire research process. These memos were then integrated into the final framework created from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2014; Timonen et al., 2018).

Results

The current study resulted in three major themes and seven minor themes related to White mentors’ experiences addressing their mentee’s racial identity, discussing social justice related topics within the mentoring relationship, and perceived importance of their positionality. Quotes from the participants are provided for each theme.

Acknowledging the Youth’s Ethnic/Racial Identity

Eighteen mentors reported conversations focused on addressing the Black ethnic/racial identity of the mentee. Most of these conversations focused on ethno-racial aspects of the mentee’s life, such as popular culture events, interactions with family members, and less than half focused on coping with racial discrimination. Three mentors reported engaging in
activities (e.g., going to an African American museum exhibit) with their mentees with the expectation of helping youth to strengthen their identities as Black youth. It is noticeable, however, that there were some mentors who did not acknowledge the youth’s Black identity as an important aspect of the mentoring relationship. Furthermore, most of the mentors did not attempt to engage youth in activities that nurtured their Black ethnic/racial identity for a variety of reasons as discussed in the sections below.

Engaging in Conversations Based on the Youth’s Ethnic/Racial Identity

Eighteen mentors engaged in conversations centered on their mentee’s ethnic/racial identity for various reasons. Some mentors discussed the youth’s Black racial identity in relation to having a White mentor and perceived racial differences. For example, Felicity reported a time when she had a conversation with her mentee focused on the mentee’s family members expressing negative statements about being mentored by a White person, “She said she was getting a lot of grief from extended family, not her immediate family, extended family, saying that she was matched with me, so she was trying to be White.” The same mentor further detailed how her mentee explained that she talked differently with the mentor than she did at home:

My mentee said, ‘Well, I don’t talk with you, like I do at home.’ And I said, ‘What do you mean?’ She gave me examples and that same day, I had to take her home to an aunt’s house. We knocked on the door. And I heard what she was talking about. And I was just flabbergasted. It brought on a big conversation between us.

Five additional mentors noticed a difference in the youth’s dialect whenever the mentees interacted with their family members and peers, in contrast to the way they communicated with their mentors. Helen detailed how she noticed her mentee would use different terminology when speaking to her compared to conversations she had with her family:

I later learned that its code switching. But before I had a term for it, I noticed that she talked differently to me than she did to her family. And even when she was relaying a story to me, when she was talking about a conversation with her mom or her sister, she used the language that they used with each other, instead of how she talked to me.

A few mentors discussed times discussed their mentee’s racial identity as a result of their mentees experiencing racial discrimination. For example, Micah reflected about having to console his mentee after being called a racial slur by a classmate:

One day we were at the park shooting hoops and just talking about life. And he was telling me at school, one of the kids was calling him a n word, and it fucking broke my heart. Here’s a White kid who’s calling him awful things just because of who he is.

Engaging in Activities Based on the Youth’s Racial Identity

Only three mentors mentioned being intentional about utilizing activities to talk about topics related to racism and broader experiences associated with being a Black person in the United States. Spencer talked extensively about exposing his mentee to different movies
to help him talk with his mentee about racial issues, “It was interesting because one of the things I made a point of doing was watching a movie with him that was all about racism with a Black hero.”

Another mentor, Kooper, explained how he was always conscious about his mentee’s racial identity in selecting activities throughout the mentoring relationship:

Oh, if there was an exhibit in town of African Americans in Austin. I would make it a point to get into that. If there were two books, I wanted to give him as a gift and maybe one was by African American author, I’d probably give him that one.

Many of the mentors explained that they did not explicitly address racial topics in the relationship because race was not a motivating factor for becoming a mentor at BBBS. For example, Evan explained that they were interested in just mentoring a youth that needed guidance and was not interested in focusing on race and culture, “We didn’t address… [race] at all. And that was probably conscious on my part, because to me why I was interested in being a big brother and a mentor, it had nothing to do with race and culture.”

Norah identified her mentee’s family background as a reason why the Black aspect of the mentee’s racial identity was not a topic of conversation in their relationship:

The mom is Hispanic, her parents are Mexican. The dad left the picture when (mentee’s name) was a toddler. So, they have a house of Hispanic culture and Black culture. But the Hispanic culture is the dominant because they have no Black grandparents or father.

A few mentors, particularly mentors older than 34, explained that they would have approached the topic of race and racial identity differently when reflecting on their past mentoring relationships with Black youth. For example, Brooks expressed regret that he did not acknowledge his mentee’s racial identity more often during their mentoring relationship:

I wish I would have handled it differently than I did. Now I feel smarter [about racial issues] but I feel like I could have handled it better then. Honestly, I think I probably tried to make it a non-issue. At the time and tried to make it like it didn’t matter.

Addressing Social Justice Topics

With regard to addressing broader social justice topics and specific dynamics of oppression that impact the lives of Black youth, mentors differed in a variety of ways on their approach. Some mentors discussed how the current social climate surrounding racial issues, propelled them to address specific issues within the mentoring relationship. Others reported not discussing any racial issues in the mentoring relationship because the topics did not surface in their mentoring experiences with youth. Finally, a few mentors expressed not feeling prepared or equipped to discuss issues associated with race and racism with their mentees.

Acknowledging the Current Social Climate

Eighteen mentors acknowledged the current social climate associated with race and racism in the United States and openly addressed with their mentees key events such as the
death of George Floyd or racial dynamics resulting from the 2020 presidential election. Wendy shared with her mentee that she attended a rally with her family after the tragic events of George Floyd’s death:

Well (mentee’s name), her mom and I had a conversation over zoom about the Black Lives Matter issue. I sent some pictures because our whole family participated in this parade that they had in our area. I felt like it was important for her to understand and to see that white people do feel that these are injustices, and we want to see them change.

Keagan discussed his reaction to his mentee telling him that his mother did not vote, prompting the mentor to discuss the importance of voting during the 2020 election:

What! Man, you got to vote. You’ve got to vote. And I explained to them, how few votes for Trump got him Michigan four years ago. And how a few votes he won in Wisconsin and how by only few votes he won in Pennsylvania.

Of interest, seven former mentors expressed that they would have addressed specific social issues around racial justice if they were mentoring their mentees during the protests that occurred in 2020. Brooks discussed his shortcomings addressing police interactions with his former mentee in their relationship and being curious of his former mentee’s perspective of the current social climate in the United States, associated with the protests that occurred in 2020:

I don’t think that I was savvy enough to really think about the police thing at that point. We just didn’t talk about racism in that way. With all of the stuff that happened this summer. That was...stuff that I really wanted to learn from him. I was interested in asking him more about his experience.

Teaching Strategies to Deal with Oppression

Twelve mentors focused on topics associated with dealing with racial oppression and racism in the mentoring relationship. Of those mentors, nine focused on teaching youth strategies to deal with different forms of racism and discrimination. Specifically, seven mentors reported coaching youth on effective ways to interact with law enforcement. Keagan explained, “Well, I’ve talked to them about how to act if they’re in a car and if they get pulled over by the cops, or if they’re just out on the street and a cop stops them.” Caitlin reflected on her strategies to help her mentee deal with interactions with the police, “I used to pop quiz him on the three things that he needs to do when, talking to the police officers, he quickly got the answers and learned those answers quick.” The same mentor further explained a scenario where her mentee had to utilize those strategies in a real encounter with the police:

A huge success was a couple months ago, he told me that he was pulled over. I’m like, “Alright, dude what you do?” He’s like, “I did the three things and they left me alone.” I’m like, “Oh, thank goodness you know, it could have turned out much worse.”
Of interest, all seven of the mentors who discussed interacting with law enforcement worked with Black boys and young men.

**Hesitancy to Address Social Justice and Colorblindness**

Ten mentors chose not to discuss racial issues with their mentees for a variety of reasons. Some mentors explained that their mentee’s age played a role in not discussing more serious social topics. Brianna explained, “I don’t think it ever came up between us, especially due to her age” (this mentor met her mentee at 8 years old).

Six mentors expressed that they did not feel well equipped to discuss issues of race and racism with their mentees. Faith elaborated on this self-perceived limitation, “I’m not super comfortable about talking about it, because I don’t feel like I’m educated enough.” Other mentors expressed wanting to address specific dynamics of racial oppression in the life of their mentees but often felt unable to do so due to their identities as a White person in the United States. Cameron elaborated on this issue and expressed fear of hurting the bond with his mentee by saying anything offensive:

> And I’m afraid that the comment will hurt. Hurt people and hurt our relationship and limit our ability to work successfully together. I’m uncomfortable with where some of his decisions are heading for him. And I don’t know what to do or say.

Knox discussed how his lack of exposure to racial issues while living in Alaska, impacted how he approached racial topics in the relationship with his mentee, “We just read about all the Black Lives Matter, and some of us don’t get it, because we don’t see it.”

**Gaining Awareness of Privileges**

Twenty-three mentors reflected with great passion about the ways in which mentoring Black youth raised personal awareness of their own privileges, sparked introspection about their upbringing, and helped them become aware about critical issues related to race, as well as how these issues impact mentoring of Black youth. Thus, as much as youth benefited from the mentoring relationship, the large majority of the mentors expressed considerable personal growth as well.

With regard to how mentoring a Black youth heightened their self-awareness of privilege and biases in their life, Helen affirmed:

> And so, especially with her, I was learning a lot. For example, when I learned it, I didn’t know what to call it. But now I do, I was learning my internal biases, that I just grew up with and not knowing what they were.

Another mentor, Caitlin, further elaborated on increased awareness related to her many privileges, in contrast to the multiple adversities experienced by her mentee:

> It’s really opened my eyes to how easy I have it, as opposed to how not easy my mentee has it. Being able to get a job or being able to secure loans or being able to drive in my car without worry of being pulled over and killed, things like that.
Dean further reflected on issues of privilege, as a result of mentoring a Black youth from an impoverished background, “He taught me a lot about what it’s like to be growing up without your parents, without much money. Not a very nice place to live near your neighborhood, that’s tough. A lot of drugs were in that neighborhood.” Another mentor, James, shared his insights related to his upbringing and privileges as a White person, reflections that were triggered by the mentoring relationship:

I recognized the benefit that I was given in my youth just to have raw capability of being born into a more privileged situation, as a White person, I do recognize that. And I think mentoring has given me an opportunity to be more present with that.

One mentor, Sebastian, reflected on a conversation he had with his mentee when his mentee turned 21 years old, which highlighted the differences between him and his mentee at that age:

When you're having a beer and someone tells you what they’re grateful for, “Oh I’m grateful that I’m not in prison. I’m grateful that I graduated from high school.” Those weren’t the top things that I thought of when I turned 21.

Other mentors did not disclose any on increased awareness of any specific privilege they possess but instead shared sentiments related on how mentoring Black youth impacted the way they view society. Brooks stated, “I would say this, I would say the Big Brothers Big Sisters was a huge eye opener for me. I felt like I knew 10% of what that experience was like for African Americans of what I know now.” When reflecting on the awareness he gained from the mentoring relationship, Kooper stated:

It’s made me try to be more aware. To not turn a blind eye, to what different communities are going through. Because living in Austin, especially west of I-35. It’s so easy to forget. Even in our own city, it’s not like that there’s neighborhoods where it’s not like that.

Other mentors reflected on wanting to make a bigger difference in society as a result of the mentoring experience. Evan disclosed:

I’m probably wrestling with what to do with the awareness I have now that I didn’t have before I got involved with him. I probably struggle every day with how can I make a difference? How...can we do better for everybody?

**Expressing Colorblindness**

According to current findings, it was clear that some of the study participants did not attempt to engage in ethnic/racial identity or racial-ethnic socialization experiences throughout the mentoring relationship. Specifically, ten mentors expressed views of not seeing or considering race as a significant factor when working with their Black mentees. When reflecting on the impact race had on the mentoring relationship, Norah explained:

I’m very happy to say that. In all the years that we were together as officially big brothers big sisters mentors. Race was never an issue. They never felt like, “Oh, but I’m Black (mentor’s name) you’re White. It’s not the same.”
Another mentor, Felicity, expressed similar sentiments when reflecting whether race had a role in the mentoring relationship, “It didn’t matter what color we were just the relationship was important to us. And we look beneath and beyond our color of our skin. That didn’t matter to us.”

In one instance, a mentor Abigail shared a story of her mentee obtaining a Commercial Driver License and experiencing discrimination by the police. The mentor disregarded the role that race had in this experience:

She was driving this big rig truck. And then she was saying that the cop pulled her over because she was Black. And I was like, no, the cop pulled you over because you probably couldn’t even see him because you were switching lanes illegally.

Twelve mentors expressed that mentoring a Black youth was similar to mentoring White youth. Norah adamantly expressed that the mentoring experience would have been the exact same experience even if her mentee was a White youth:

Oh, my goodness, I think they would have been the very same as (mentee’s name). Because, again, I don’t see color. I see a human being, the creation of God, who is in a program for a reason. Something is lacking in his or her life.

Cameron acknowledged that there may be differences in mentoring a White youth versus a Black youth; however much of the relationship would be similar:

I think a lot of the experience can be very similar. A lot of things I described could easily be a White kid. The economic issues, family issues. And so those can be very much the same. And that was 50% of it. And there were times it was 80% the same.

The same mentor further acknowledged that whereas there are similarities, there are distinct differences as well, “But, when it comes to somebody getting arrested, and we’re having this conversation about what happened, it’s unlikely that the White male is going to be profiled.”

**Being Mindful of Interracial Dynamics**

The majority of research participants expressed being cognizant and mindful of how they were perceived by other people in the community as they engaged in mentoring activities. Specifically, many of the mentors in the study recalled receiving strange looks from people when they were in public settings with their mentees. Caitlin explained, “We always got those weird looks when we were out, and probably even now. This White girl with this 6-years-old young Black man, and now these 6 feet four 18-years-old, young Black man.”

Another mentor, Fiona, told a story about how she noticed her mentee was being followed at a store during a mentoring outing, “So her and I go in the store together. And somebody is helping me get something. Meanwhile, somebody is following her, because she went somewhere else, and I visibly noticed this.”

Some expressed their concerns for being a White person working with a Black youth. Notably, five mentors voiced struggling with feelings of inadequacy as mentors for Black youth. Kooper openly expressed how he overcame feelings of inadequacy early in the relationship with his Black mentee because he is White:
In the beginning, I did feel very inadequate. I would always think like, ah poor (mentee’s name). I wish he could have gotten like a Black brother, but he got me. And I think I was really insecure about it…. But as time wore on, I stopped worrying about it.

Cameron expressed similar worries about his effectiveness to provide adequate mentoring as a White person, “I often wonder, because the fact that I’m his White mentor that I’m not sure I ever had the ability to provide everything he really needed.” There was one mentor, Micah, who was adamant that the reason he was able to become so close with his mentee was because of the racial differences:

I think what makes the bond very strong between us is bridging that gap between White culture and Black culture…I feel like if I would have had a white mentee, we would have been able to connect on a lot of things. But I think by seeing the struggles that my mentee was going through because he was Black and being open to letting him tell me about everything and showing him that things don’t have to be that way brought us very close.

Discussion

This study examined how White mentors addressed topics related to ethnic/racial identity and social justice, while acknowledging their own privileges when mentoring Black youth in community-based youth mentoring programs. The majority of mentors had conversations with youth related to their Black identity. However, a small minority of mentors utilized culturally focused activities (e.g., visiting an African American museum exhibit) to help youth embrace their ethnic/racial identities. This is a significant finding, as empirical research indicates that mentoring programs can constitute an ideal avenue to promote ethnic/racial identity development among Black youth (Gordon et al., 2009; Sánchez et al., 2018). Thus, mentors and mentoring programs that fail to promote aspects of ethnic/racial identity miss a significant opportunity to cultivate identity development among Black youth.

Some of the mentors noticed differences in how their mentees spoke when spending time with them, in contrast to the language they used when interacting with family members and peers. This indicates the mentors’ acknowledgement of the phenomenon known as code switching (i.e., altering speech between different speaking styles depending on one’s context; Gaither et al., 2015). It is unclear how the perceived code switching impacted the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. It is possible the mentor’s oversight of code switching could have been associated with missed opportunities for mentors to acknowledge and address racial differences in language and learn from their mentee (Baker-Bell, 2017). Applying what is known about how cross-cultural communicators continually negotiate respect for their identities (e.g., cultural identity theory, identity management theory, facework) can help mentors and mentoring programs promote more skilled, identity-alert communication among youth and mentors from differing cultural backgrounds (see Collier, 2005; Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

Further, of significant concern, less than half of the study participants reported engaging in conversations to process experiences of racial discrimination and broader social justice concerns experienced by youth, while others explicitly denied the perceived discrimination
experienced by their mentees. The lack of acknowledgement of the youth’s experiences by mentors in BBBS is especially troubling due to the number of Black youth participating within BBBS mentoring programs. Specifically, in the year 2020, 32% of youth receiving mentoring by BBBS were Black and 66% of all youth identified as either Black, Indigenous and/or People of Color (Porzig, 2021). Noteworthily, emerging literature suggests that mentors can be advocates for social change with regards to racial oppression (Albright et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2013; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Weist-Serdan, 2017). Unfortunately, there were some study participants who reported feeling unprepared to discuss oppression-related topics such as racial discrimination and broader social justice issues with their mentees, particularly when considering their identities as White individuals in the United States. This finding exemplifies the need for targeted social justice training for White mentors serving marginalized Black youth (Anderson et al., 2018; Sánchez et al., 2021) and reiterates the need for specific preparation and support on how to approach sensitive topics, especially with diverse populations.

Although mentors did not uniformly acknowledge issues of privilege (e.g., White privilege) and racial oppression in the mentoring relationship, most study participants spoke passionately about how mentoring Black youth raised their awareness related to their own privileges, sparked introspection about their upbringings, and challenged them to become aware of social problems that they had overlooked in the past. This finding corroborates recent research that illustrates that mentors can gain awareness of dynamics of social injustice as a result of mentoring marginalized youth (Duron et al., 2020). This finding also aligns with intergroup contact theory’s premise that interactions with individuals who share cultural differences can reduce one’s prejudice towards different groups (Al-Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Davies et al., 2011; Dovidio et al., 2003). This finding is of particular importance because it illustrates the substantial benefits that volunteer mentors can gain from the mentoring experience. Moreover, this finding illustrates mentors can gain exposure to different perspectives and the cultural wealth youth and their families have to offer (Rhodes, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

Limitations and Strengths

While this study has numerous strengths, it is not without its limitations. First, this study was conducted during the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented in-person interviews, and this could have possibly hindered the quality and depth of the interviews (Johnson et al., 2021). Additionally, due to the sample size and the demographic of the participants in this study, current findings may not be generalizable to other types of mentoring programs that utilize a different demographic of mentors (e.g., peer mentoring programs that pair youth to peers in their communities). Third, the study did not capture the perspectives of Black youth in these relationships with White mentors. Fourth, this study only utilized one coder of the transcripts and it is essential to consider the ways in which the first author’s positionality impacted the analysis of the data (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Finally, it is important to acknowledge that BBBS is a nationally recognized mentoring program in the United States. The findings in this study may have been different if the participants in this study volunteered for a different mentoring program.

Regarding strengths, this study addresses a critical gap in the youth mentoring literature, particularly as it refers to qualitative studies focused on mentoring programs serving Black youth. Further, the constructivist grounded theory approach provided a rigorous methodological approach that has been rarely reported in the evaluation of mentoring.
programs focused on Black youth. Therefore, the findings of this study are highly relevant for informing youth mentoring and youth development scholarship and programs serving Black youth that are engaged in a cross-racial mentoring relationship with a White mentor. Future research is needed to examine how mentors heightened social awareness affect how they discuss mentees’ experiences, assertions, and actions beyond racial differences (Cohen et al., 1999). Further, research is needed to assess how community-based mentoring programs, such as BBBS, can cultivate ethnic/racial identity and socio-political awareness among the Black youth they serve. Considering the importance of ethnic/racial identity among Black adolescents (Cross et al., 2017; Neblett et al., 2012; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), and the many social injustices impacting marginalized youth, it is essential that mentoring programs consider how their core strategies best address the unique needs of Black youth. Lack of cultural awareness and recognition of the specific needs and strengths of Black youth within youth mentoring agencies may indicate the widespread effects of White supremacy, which then can hinder the potential impact of mentoring programs in diverse communities (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2021).

Conclusion

Considering the unique factors that impact youth development for Black youth in the United States (e.g., ethnic/racial identity, racial discrimination, cultural traditions), youth mentoring interventions that are culturally responsive are of the upmost importance. Current findings may be translated into specific actions for future research on youth mentoring, in addition to the implementation of youth mentoring programs for Black youth that utilize cross-racial mentoring matches. Although current findings are preliminary, this study can be used to start critical conversations focused on examining how White mentors addressing important issues that impact Black youth in their mentoring relationships. Ultimately, these efforts are essential to help youth mentoring programs provide the most effective mentoring for Black youth possible.

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