

RESEARCH SUMMARY

“Will I be able to understand my mentee? Examining the potential risk of the dominant culture mentoring marginalized youth”

What is this study about?

A common conversation in the mentoring field is whether or not mentees should be matched with mentors who share the same race as themselves. In part, this conversation began through the recognition that many youth mentoring relationships are being initiated between mentors and mentees who come from very different social, cultural, ethnic, and/or racial backgrounds. This study offers a thoughtful yet critical exploration of this issue by describing the potential risks of cross-race matching and what steps mentoring organizations can take to help avoid them.

Where did the study take place?

This research study took place in the United States.

Who was involved in the study?

This study involved 72 youth workers and 12 adolescents aged 17-19. Participants were involved in either community-based or site-based programs that varied slightly in structure and focus (i.e., some programs emphasized academic leadership, while others focused on health and wellness).

How was the study conducted?

To begin this study, the primary researcher conducted individual interviews with seven experienced staff members of different community-based mentoring organizations. Three of these participants were employed by organizations that specifically offer mentoring programs that require “cultural congruency” between mentors and mentees. Next, the researcher conducted four focus groups with 65 youth workers who worked in schools, after-school programs, and community centres. The researcher concluded the study by interviewing 12 adolescents, all of whom identified as African American.

What were the key findings?

This study highlighted several important considerations regarding cross-race matching.

To begin, this research reminds us that the vast majority of mentoring programs were founded by members of the “dominant culture” – which, in the field of mentoring, often refers to White, middle- to upper-class individuals of European descent. In contrast, many mentoring organizations serve communities that are often composed of minority children and youth from more diverse social, cultural, and racial backgrounds.

As such, this research suggests that mentoring organizations need to be aware of the potential negative impacts of matching mentors from the dominant culture with mentees from more marginalized

communities and cultures, in terms of their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identity development.

In our Canadian context, these insights are especially relevant given that the colonization of Indigenous communities was often driven by the belief that Euro-Christian values and cultural practices were superior to all others.

Almost every staff member or youth worked interviewed believed that same-race matches were the ideal option for mentees from more marginalized backgrounds.

“... mentoring relationships in which an individual from the dominant culture is mentoring a young person from a marginalized culture or population may negatively impact the young person, specifically in regard to their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity development” (p.74).

In support of same-race matching, participants often explained that these kinds of relationships expose mentees to concrete examples of who they might become, which may help them develop a healthier sense of self and cultural, ethnic, and/or racial identity.

Why does this research matter?

This research recommended that mentoring programs take a more individualized approach to the matching process that is sensitive to the impact of cross-race matching.

- This research suggests that mentoring organizations might consider assessing the mindsets of both mentors and mentees – in terms of their racial, ethnic, and or/cultural identities. After gathering this information, mentoring practitioners might avoid matching mentees with underdeveloped cultural/racial/ethnic identities with a mentor who has a strong sense of the right way to live and behave, according to their own racial, cultural, and ethnic biases.
- In contrast, by assessing these variables prior to the matching process, staff members might be able to match mentees with mentors who will be able to validate their race, navigate respectful conversations about their cultural and ethnic beliefs/practices, and help them decide which beliefs and values they hold dear and want to incorporate into their sense of self.

Reference

Lindwall, J. (2017). Will I be able to understand my mentee? Examining the potential risk of the dominant culture mentoring marginalized youth. *Journal of Youth Development*, 12(1), 72.