

Who Keeps The Keeper?: Perspectives, Experiences, and Challenges in Black Male Mentor Relationships

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Abstract

Mentors are known to provide positive social companionship and to support youth development for those they serve, especially in communities of color. While testimonials and studies have displayed the benefits of having a supportive mentor relationship, research has yet to focus on the process of building such relationships from the mentor's perspective. More specifically, the work and perspectives of Black male mentors in developing and facilitating these relationships are rarely shared, even though they serve and support Black boys, a marginalized and vulnerable population within the United States. Without understanding the adult side of the mentoring process, researchers and practitioners cannot fully advise Black male mentors on how to improve and commit to relationships that may prove challenging. This study interrogates how mentors reflect on and perceive their own specific actions while supporting a mentee. I observed two meetings of a Black male mentoring organization and interviewed six Black male mentors and two mentees in New Haven, Connecticut. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with these groups, I identified key themes within Black male relationships that both mentors and mentees viewed as vital to mentee growth and personal achievement. In addition, these interviews revealed in-depth reflection on what it means for Black men to serve as mentors and why they choose to serve Black boys. These interviews are supplemented with mentoring observations that illuminate the themes and reflections in action. This study concludes with detailed insights on actions to prioritize in Black male mentoring relationships and how Black men think about those actions.

Keywords: mentorship, Black men, adult-youth relationships

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“Yeah, you know how we do, we do it for the people.”

--a-r zachariah

PREFACE

“Ok. Let your head rest in my hand. Relax. I got you. I promise. I won't let you go. Hey man. I got you. There you go. Ten seconds. Right there. You in the middle of the world.” - Juan from the movie *Moonlight* (2016) as he teaches Little how to swim

Mentorship has defined memorable moments of personal development for me since I was a child, especially when it comes to being mentored by and mentoring Black men. In high school, I participated in a New Haven summer mentoring program for Black and Latino boys. This program was meant to introduce us to lessons in social etiquette and in principles for being a responsible man in the future. We would attend large group lectures of about fifty people, as well as small mentoring group meetings with a Black or Latino mentor leading their designated mentees. While I benefited deeply from the lessons on principles regarding determination and care for others, I felt that the relationships that I made with my own and other mentors lacked a deeply personal or emotional connection. I returned to that same program the following year as a high school mentor for the newly introduced middle school cohort of boys. In my attempts to serve these boys and help them think through their goals and the lessons at hand, I struggled to maintain strong relationships with each of them beyond the that summer.

My first experiences as a mentor in high school have led me to think deeply about the difficulty I had in bonding with my mentor and my mentees. For many of the Black and Latino boys in that program, there was not a consistent male adult in their lives who supported them and could speak to their particular experiences. The program tried to mitigate that disparity, but my experience in short-lived mentor relationships made me wonder what were some of the challenges and decisions that influence a successful bond. Such a close bond may seem inconsequential when the necessary resources and lessons are shared with mentees. However, establishing a strong relationship with a mentee can determine how long that mentor integrates their mentee into additional social networks of support and care. Despite my frustrations and challenges through the

high school program, I persist in mentoring because I recognize how special it feels to be cared for, taught by, and respected by someone outside of your immediate life. While I value the lessons I learned through my mentoring program, I know that having a person who I trusted to talk through each application of those lessons would have helped me clarify ways of normalizing them in my life.

Furthermore, for low-income Black boys like myself, finding a positive Black male mentor is vital for expanding their views on self-expression and future aspirations. Having loving family members who do not identify as male is still important, as those people influence the way a Black boy conceptualizes his position in the world and the way he learns to interact with people besides other Black men. But the unique value of a Black male mentor relationship for Black boys comes from close contact with someone who not only grew up with similar experiences as them, but who also represents a model for the type of person they could be within the Black male identity – a model that they would not have been introduced to otherwise. Since American society is structured in such a way that racial, gender, and class identities strongly differentiate one’s experience, providing mentors for children of marginalized identities helps them to ground their personality within those intersections and to grow from the help of others in their personal network. For me, mentorship from Black men came in short doses. However, as a mentor and mentee, I have felt the significance of having a support system in the image of who I may want to be in the world. I have felt the moments of impact when a little Black boy is made the center of another person’s world.

INTRODUCTION

Mentorship exists within several societies around the world as a positive mechanism of support for youth in their developmental growth, and for adults in their professional growth. Within America, some initiatives have encouraged adults to serve as mentors to youth with a focus on changing the trajectories of those youth who are most marginalized and disadvantaged. The most recent and publicized was the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative, created by former President Barack Obama in 2014 to help young men of color achieve their desired goals by acknowledging and reducing opportunity gaps.¹ MBK and its relative initiatives at state and local levels reinvigorated the way Americans think about guiding Black and Latino boys, who are seen as lacking necessary resources and support, by pinpointing mentors as a possible source for filling those missing needs.

For youth in particular, mentors offer more than just a senior presence that can inform mentees of the correct choices to reach definite success. In fact, scholars in psychology have bolstered America's trust in youth mentors through their work identifying several benefits that come from being mentored as a child: reduced health-risk behaviors (DuBois & Silverthorn 2005); increased social capital (Hamilton & Hamilton 2004); improved ability in managing emotions (Rhodes et al. 2006); and improved relationships with family and community members (Keller 2005; Rhodes 2002). Educators, policymakers, and community leaders understandably recognize these impacts as essential in keeping youth on a positive course towards achievement. Mentors model the behavior of people who have successfully reached their goals, as well as introduce their mentees to ways of acting, thinking, and interacting with others that will help them do the same.

¹ "My Brother's Keeper," *The White House of President Barack Obama*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/node/279811>.

With that said, simply having a mentor present in a child's life is not always enough. For example, a mentor who has the same socioeconomic, racial, and gender background as a mentee may still have a short and unfulfilling relationship due to aspects of their personality or social circumstances that make it difficult to connect. As the nation increases its efforts to offer youth effective mentors, it relies on scholarly work that studies the most ideal mentor relationships and represents the most idealized traits for being seen as successful in America. Therefore, initiatives such as MBK, in their truly noble goals of serving young men of color, falter at achieving success when they abide to a model of teaching "at-risk" boys how to develop the traits of "successful" men. It assumes both that mentors are generally able to communicate methods towards success and that mentees desire the same exact lives as their mentors. More attention is given to the *products* of mentorship rather than the *process* of mentorship. This is similar to the common concept of "teaching to the test" in the education system in that the mentee is taught the exact skills that a larger system has deemed necessary for future success – regardless of how useful those skills are in practice.

Such an outcomes-based approach to mentoring is understandable when working with Black boys who face social disadvantage through common social systems. The carceral state has a strong hold on Black youth; they represented 34 percent of juvenile arrests in 2014,² but only 14 percent of the U.S. population in 2015.³ Many Black boys that go into this juvenile justice system intersect with the 41 percent of Black boys who did not graduate from high school in the 2012-2013 school year.⁴ As opposed to using these statistics to reduce the lives of Black boys to their

² "Demographic Characteristics of Juvenile Arrests, 2014," *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*, 13 Dec. 2015, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/qa05104.asp?qaDate=2014>.

³ "America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2016 - Demographic Background," *Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics*, <https://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/demo.asp>.

⁴ The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, *Schott Foundation for Public Education*, <http://blackboysreport.org/>.

levels of incarceration and education, this study acknowledges that there are several legitimate reasons for trying to mediate in the life course of Black boys through mentorship. When communities see their youth falling behind due to social barriers outside of their control, it is understandable to help those youth remove those barriers through guidance.

Despite the necessity of mentoring, mentor relationships based on achieving specific outcomes or benefits do not fully recognize the power that a mentor's social context has to alter or disrupt the success of the mentoring experience. These relationships require trust, which depends on a mentee's prior experiences with other adults, their feelings of safety around other people, and their immediate social network while they are being mentored. In addition, the mentor's social context influences their reasons and processes for mentoring. If it makes sense to offer mentors to youth because their social landscape presents them with so many barriers, then it does not serve mentors or mentees well to form relationships without that landscape in mind. Considering these factors, it becomes more difficult to teach a mentee certain traits – or to assume mentees are even interested in acquiring them. Though it is imperative to understand the psychological impacts of mentorship, it is necessary to understand that those impacts occur within a social realm for a child that changes daily.

The present study centers the process of mentoring between Black boys and Black men. As a population that has been centered in the scholarly conversations about mentorship over the past few years, Black males serve as an important case study for the ways in which social context and process influence the effectiveness of a mentor relationship. However, rather than analyzing the impacts of mentorship, this study explores the mentorship process: specifically the perspectives of Black male mentors and mentees on what it means to enter these relationships and to work towards building a support system. By approaching this topic through sociological methods and analysis, I aim to reveal socio-structural mechanisms that affect how successfully a mentor can

connect with and teach their mentee. This work is meant to supplement and situate the findings of researchers and policymakers who have pushed outcomes-based approaches to mentorship.

Through this study, I will answer a series of questions regarding the depths of a mentor relationship. What challenges do Black male mentors perceive to be common in their attempts to connect with Black male mentees? In the formation of mentor relationships, how do certain choices by these mentors resonate with mentees and lead to stronger bonds? To answer these questions, I have performed a mixed methods research study to understand Black male mentors' perspectives on their experiences in establishing successful mentorship bonds. Drawing upon field observations, semi-structured interviews with participants in a mentoring program, and a focus group interview with college-aged Black male mentors, I have identified six themes that exemplify the experiences of Black male mentors trying to provide mentees with a positive role model: mentoring format, identity formation, points of convergence, commitment, challenging narratives, and inspirations to mentor. To present this study, I will first discuss the literature focused on youth mentorship at-large and the social context of mentor relationships. Next, I will describe the data I collected and the context of the participants' mentor perspectives. This will be followed with an explanation of my various methods, how I bring them into conversation with each other, and the analysis of the data I collected through these methods. Lastly, I will discuss the themes that I found within the study and speak on the further implications of this work in understanding Black male mentorship and the larger field of youth mentoring.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a revered form of service in many countries and communities, mentoring is crucial for youth who either lack a network of supportive adults or need additional guidance outside of their household. While this study examines groups with goals of academic and professional achievement, it focuses on a shared interest in building amicable and productive bonds between

mentors and mentees. This study explores the moments when mentor relationships are strengthened and clarifies the reasons why relationships struggle to develop.

In low-income Black communities, adult male mentors for young boys come in a variety of forms: uncles, big brothers, teachers, coaches, and in many cases, gang leaders. The latter case understandably causes concern for many people, but it also reflects the reality that some Black boys are searching *primarily* for connections with Black men who connect with their personal experiences and interests – wherever they can find them. Therefore, I will focus on youth mentoring as it pertains to the mentor’s underlying interest in committing time and companionship to an interested mentee. The literature review presented here introduces this topic of mentor relationships by sharing the current research on youth mentoring, as well as outlining the social factors that can impact this activity. By recognizing social contexts and identities that are inherent in forming these relationships, this study moves beyond the outcomes-based model of youth mentoring scholarship and practice.

The literature review will be structured as follows. Historical context for mentoring in the United States is necessary first to introduce youth mentor relationships. Following that, current scholarship on contextual variables like race and gender in youth mentoring provides a landscape for studying mentors and mentees within a particular social category. The review concludes with studies on mentoring perspectives that specifically frame the role of my study within the larger literature.

A History of Mentoring in the United States

Americans’ inherent trust and admiration for mentors stems from the early 20th century, when formal mentorship became more commonplace in response to a changing nation. Specifically, the alteration of the American landscape through urban development, rapid immigration, and industrialization led to a decrease in many families’ economic and social well-

being (Baker and Maguire 2005). Children in these families experienced extreme poverty, worked in dangerous factories, and rarely graduated from high school; they were likely to participate in delinquent activities as an outlet or a means to provide for themselves. As a result, community volunteers stepped up to help. Freedman (1999) found that middle-class volunteers through the Friendly Visiting movement worked to provide moral support to these families and children; Baker and Maguire (2005) similarly found that social reformers served as adult advocates for youth who would have to go through the criminal justice system. The renowned sociologist and community pioneer, Jane Addams, was one of these social reformers, using her knowledge of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism to positively impact the lives of youth in Chicago (Deegan 1988). By combining commitment to underprivileged youth with carefully executed social reforms centered on child well-being, these neighborhood volunteers established themselves as individuals who could provide purposeful support and care that was otherwise missing from regular social interactions.

This movement expanded thanks to the work being done in the new juvenile court system. Just as Jane Addams and other social reformers worked as advocates and hired probation officers for youth in these courts, a court clerk named Ernest Coulter created the Big Brother movement in 1904 (Beiswinger 1985). Coulter encouraged men who served as business and civic leaders to serve as big brothers to boys who repeatedly entered the juvenile court system. This movement, which evolved into the national Big Brothers, Big Sisters mentoring organization, encapsulates the goals of the advocates like Addams and Coulter by formalizing the presence of a supportive adult in a disadvantaged child's life. It should be noted that the work done within juvenile courts was led by women who were social reformers in their communities; thus, these women's pioneering social work planted the seed for future mentoring organizations. By the mid-20th century, Americans saw mentoring as a social good delivered through the morally responsible acts of volunteering adults.

Today, mentoring organizations and individual mentors are still revered for their values of advocacy and care for youth. As of 2014, an estimated 4.5 million children were in formal mentor relationships through mentoring organizations, as opposed to only 300,000 children in the early 1990s.⁵ Clearly, there has been an increase in Americans' enthusiasm towards mentors since they entered the social framework of child services. However, Baker and Maguire (2005) identify periods of “divergence” and “focus” when psychologists began to search for measurable outcomes of adding mentors as an intervention in the lives of disadvantaged youth. Before the 1990s, psychological studies examined the development of delinquency and ways of preventing it, but lacked specific focus on mentorship as a variable worth studying on its own. From the 1990s onwards, however, research by community psychologists and non-profit organizations shifted to center on mentorship, particularly with studies of Big Brothers, Big Sisters. The results of these studies did not agree on the impacts of mentorship on youth, thus complicating the narrative that Americans had developed around mentorship as being a cure for youth delinquency and disadvantage.

Modeling Mentor Relationships with Youth

Mentor relationships occur formally and informally in a variety of formats. At its base, youth mentoring requires an adult-youth relationship, thus leaving it open for teachers, coaches, relatives, counselors, and community members to serve as mentors for any youth within their social sphere. The individuals who volunteer for this social good tend to be well-connected, well-educated, or extroverted (Wilson 2000). So, it is typical for members of communities and professional networks to trust those mentors who offer their services to youth; they are seen as the

⁵ Mentoring Effect: Young People's Perspectives on the Outcomes and Availability of Mentoring. *MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership*, 2014, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=266903>.

most capable people to be passing down knowledge. Levinson (1978) found that individuals who volunteer as mentors serve as a positive model for a life course mentees can follow. In Levinson's study *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, he was surprised to find that mentors played a vital role in the lives of middle-aged men who he interviewed. Specifically, he found that these men's interactions with mentors in their youth had a lasting impact on their life through adulthood. This work, alongside the trust given to those who would serve as mentors, supplemented the belief that mentors hold valuable influence on the lives of young people.

Specifically, researchers have theorized what influence mentors can have through the context of developmental psychology. Many psychologists have investigated how supportive adults mitigate the risks in children's lives and provide protective factors for them from social harms (Masten and Garnezy 1985, Rutter 1987). This research is grounded in the understanding that positive relationships in any form can help youth who suffer from or are exposed to psychosocial risk or stress. Bretherton and Munholland (1999) coin attachment theory to explain how positive adults can mitigate stressors for youth. When a younger person is socially attached to an adult who can identify and pacify difficult situations, they are building the base for a trusting and successful relationship. Therefore, the ability to intervene in a younger person's life and to provide a constant source of reflection is believed to initiate ideal mentor relationships. A younger person becomes more attached once they are aware of an adult's willingness to guide them through decisions and experiences.

Once these relationships are defined through trust and support, mentors begin to offer opportunities to expand their mentees' sense of self-worth and identity through personal reflection. While some mentors may serve solely as emotional advocates, researchers have found that many offer knowledge and practices to help mentees develop their goals and personal interests (Darling et al. 1994, Hamilton and Hamilton 2004, Rhodes 2002). The basis for these knowledge-sharing

moments is explained by social learning and social cognitive theories. Bandura (1982, 1989) identified that a person's self-efficacy increases as they are encouraged to continue their efforts, given a role model of positive behaviors and opportunities to succeed. Scholarship on mentors relies on these theories because the constant interaction between mentors and mentees implies a stream of social interactions where the mentor offers a source of personal reflection. Within this model of learning, mentors can help mentees manage their emotions (Rhodes et al. 2006) as well as initiate a process of identity development (Darling et al. 1994, Rhodes 2002). Thus, mentees develop a view of themselves through the care of adults who see them for all their future goals, interests, and personality traits.

Upon recognition of a mentee's goals and interests, mentors can begin to shepherd their mentees into their own social networks of successful, like-minded individuals. Positive mentors integrate mentees into social spheres that replicate the mentors' values (Catalano and Hawkins 1996). Immersion into new social networks provides additional advocates and builds a mentee's *social capital*, which Portes (1998) defines as the benefits that someone receives from participation in a specific social group. For disenfranchised groups, this access to social capital can have a large impact on how they view their ability to achieve future aspirations. Young (2006) found that low-income Black men with connections outside of their immediate neighborhood had optimistic views of the world and developed ambitious goals for themselves. This was not true for those men who only spoke and interacted with local networks; they would only connect with other individuals who felt incapable of imagining personal narratives outside of poverty and discrimination. Clearly, the presence of positive social capital is important to marginalized groups as it facilitates a re-imagining of personal, professional, and emotional possibilities for their future. Mentees rely on close relationships with mentors that are grounded in emotional and personal trust in order to reach this period of social capital gain. The expansion of a mentee's network is reliant on an

idealized, theorized model of mentor relationships and their socio-emotional impact. This ideal mentorship model, progressing from attachment to self-reflection to social capital, is shown in Figure 1.

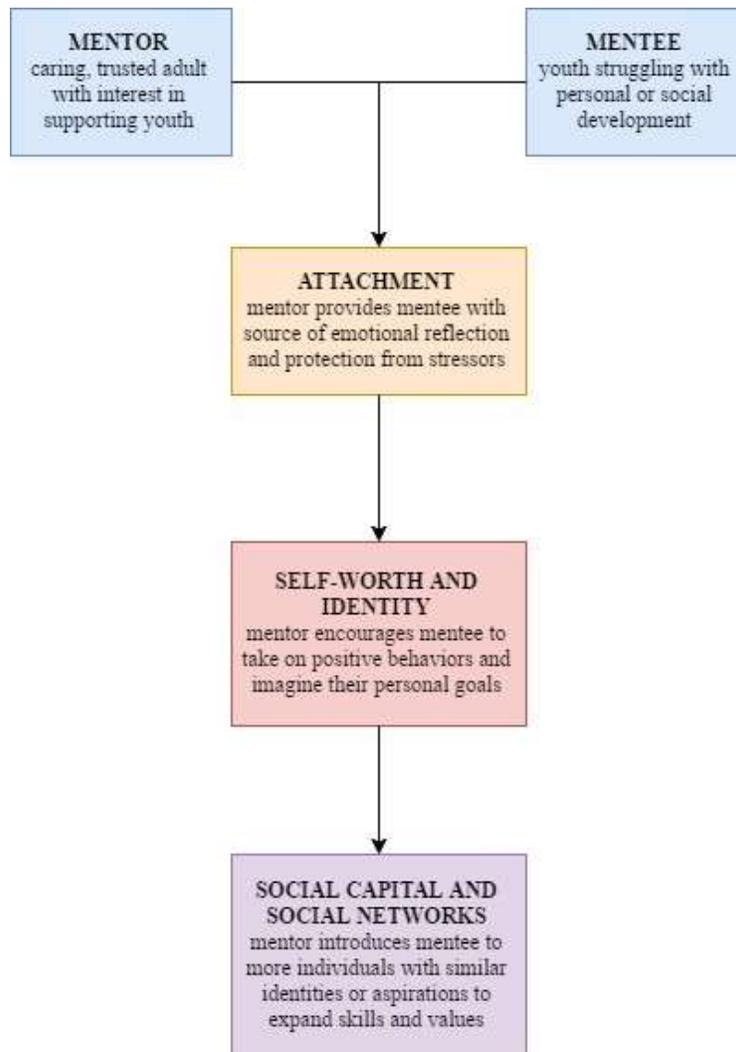


Figure 1: Ideal Mentor Relationship Model

However, the formation of mentoring relationships *in practice* is studied much less than such theories of relationships – theories that often assume such relationships' success. While scholars like Reis et al. (2000) emphasize that mentor relationships *start* from sharing information, emotions, and goals, scholars of mentorship have found scattered results on relationship *development*. The variation does not seem to be due to disagreement in the literature, but due to a

limited scope on just the mentor and mentee, as opposed to factors surrounding those actors' lives. For example, Morrow and Styles (1995) identify two types of mentor relationships: developmental and prescriptive. Developmental relationships require a mentor who is focused on a youth-driven approach to mentoring and is flexible to the needs of a mentee. In contrast, prescriptive relationships were considered less ideal because the mentors would set goals and rules for the relationship without consideration of the mentees' preferences. Hamilton and Hamilton (1990, 1992) come to different conclusions when focusing on the mentor's need to provide activities that build the mentees' knowledge and skills. These studies investigate what makes mentor relationships positive, but often without acknowledging the frames in which one's social identity and context could complicate the ease of their success. A youth-driven approach is admirable, but not always realistic. What if the youth does not feel motivated in most parts of their life to express their interests? Mentorship activities can help youth develop moral and practical skills, but what if mentees feel insecure initiating those activities? This study relies on questions like these to interrogate mentor relationships through what mentors and mentees must experience beyond just the mentorship relationship.

Social Identities and Context in Mentoring

As mentor programs increase around the United States, they have reached youth of various backgrounds in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and disability. For the sake of this study, I will focus on research regarding racial identity and gender as it pertains to the *Black male* mentors and mentees who I interviewed. Research on the intersections of mentorship with social identities builds a clearer idea of the social context that Black men must inhabit when creating mentor relationships. While the following literature does not encompass the research and questions regarding youth of all backgrounds, the practice of

establishing a contextual lens must not be forgone, as it pushes the idealized model of mentor relationships (Fig. 1) to acknowledge diversity in the real world.

While many mentoring organizations release reports on the best practices for mentoring youth of different identities (MENTOR 2009; 2016), there is a lack of consistent research regarding the influence of race and ethnicity in mentorship. One study by Rhodes et al. (2002) complicates common assumptions that race plays a large influence on mentor relationships. Rhodes et al. (2002) find few differences in relationship longevity between same-race and cross-race mentor matches, when considering shared interests and the mentee's racial preferences for a mentor. However, that study relies on a match between mentors and mentees on several other factors besides race, as well as limiting the analysis to relationship longevity rather than relationship quality and methods of support. Like the theoretical model of mentor relationships, it relies more on idealized ways of viewing mentorship than on realistic relationships that may not be perfectly matched or stable. It assumes the best-possible situation for mentors and mentees to enter. Notably, there is not enough research of the same caliber asking how to help in more difficult mentor-mentee pairing situations.

Other studies of race and mentoring relationships are scattered, typically indicating a complex connection between race, gender, and socioeconomic status. There is little research on race and mentor relationships, specifically, besides the successes and failures of mentee matching. Instead, studies that focus on race in peer relationships amongst youth tend to be used as frames for understanding mentor relationships. DuBois and Hirsch (1990) exemplify this when they found that European American girls had more peer support than boys, while the same was not true for African American youth. Here, a discrepancy occurs across race, though DuBois and Hirsch do not speculate on a cause. However, in another study by Way and Pahl (2001), they found that middle-class White American and African American girls had higher levels of self-

disclosure in their friendships than low-income girls of the same races. When socioeconomic status is incorporated, then the variation is complicated once more; race cannot be determined as the only factor in how one relates to others. By positioning these studies together, it is easier to see how whole social identities and contexts can impact relationship processes, thus influencing the way a mentor connects with a mentee. The more we consider how factors outside of the best relationship practices change the appearance and success of mentor relationships, the less realistic the idealized mentorship model appears.

Gender is similar to race in how it intersects with other factors within an identity. Indeed, literature shares important insights on how gender determines the types of relationships that male mentees experience. Morrow and Styles (1995) discovered that within a study of Big Brothers, Big Sisters programs, the boys were more likely to form youth-driven, developmental relationships than girls. Further studies have complicated this finding when taking into consideration the programs' structure. For example, Bogat and Liang (2005) saw that girls in the programs had more behavioral problems than boys when the program structure focused on activities rather than discussion. Their finding matches with Pollack's (1999) assertion that boys tend to prefer "doing together," and participating in shared activities. Since this study is centered on Black men, it is important to keep this knowledge in mind for how mentors and mentees develop their relationship through activities.

'Neediness,' too, is another little-studied factor that can impact the way mentor relationships function. Baldrige et al. (2011), in researching community-based educational spaces, explains how Black males are seen through the trope of being "at-risk," but must be paradoxically re-imagined beyond it in order to get the support they need to reach adulthood successfully. Labels of need, such as 'at-risk', that are placed upon Black youth may reflect their social inequality in many parts of the United States, but such labels do not encompass the entirety of Black lives and

identities. Unfortunately, such labels lead individuals and organizations that work with these youth to assume a lack of agency on the part of youth, and limit the interactions with youth to conversations about failure and inadequacy rather than about success.

Furthermore, McCloskey and Cann (2013) support the claim that such ‘deficit language’ like this is limiting both to mentors and mentees, as there is a hierarchical dynamic set up in which mentors are framed as role models (a praiseworthy label) and mentees are framed as needy (a label indicating low status). Aside from possibly belittling mentees, such language changes the practices and acts of engagement that mentors believe their mentees need. Cohen et al. (1999) referenced Erving Goffman’s (1963) term “wise” when explaining that mentors should support mentees in a “wise” manner; being wise means seeing someone who is socially viewed on the margins and treating them as a full, respected person. Their study emphasizes that a “wise” mentor should be capable of balancing assumptions of their mentee’s competence with holding high expectations for personal growth. That relationship acknowledges the positive attributes that mentees hold from the social position they are in, as well as respecting the expertise and support the mentors offer. Outside of Cohen and their colleague’s study, mentorship research does not fully engage with how a label of poverty or neediness may impact the way mentors and mentees relate. This study interrogates the mentor relationship for the role these labels can play.

Mentoring Perspectives

Some key studies on mentoring perspectives have gone beyond outcomes-based research and are more qualitative in nature. Spencer (2007a), in a thematic analysis of interviews with formal male mentor pairs, found that both actors deeply appreciated emotional support that surpassed conventional forms of masculinity. In this instance, a successful relationship was predicated on purely emotional and personal vulnerability, as opposed to the achievement of certain outcomes or adherence to program structure. In another study, Spencer (2007b) studied

mentor relationship failures with male and female formal mentor pairs. Relationships typically failed based on several factors: “(a) mentor or protégé abandonment, (b) perceived lack of protégé motivation, (c) unfulfilled expectations, (d) deficiencies in mentor relational skills, including the inability to bridge cultural divides, [and] (e) family interference” (2007b: 331). While most of these factors relate to a lack of connection between the mentor and mentee, the final factor of family interference touches on the idea of a contextual variable that held impact on the possible relationship. It is possible that the other factors that Spencer lists are products of similar contextual variables.

As mentioned in the history of mentorship, there are social and personal variables that inspire mentors to start mentoring, and to enjoy it if their relationships are successful. However, one study by Philip and Hendry (2000) introduces a specific benefit for mentors that may not be inherent when first becoming a mentor. After interviewing mentors in informal mentor relationships, they found that serving as a mentor helps those adults develop a form of cultural capital as they think through their personal challenges. In this study, “cultural capital” is used in a similar way to social capital as a set of knowledge and skills that help someone succeed in different social networks. For mentors, their cultural capital is developed by observing the lives of their mentees and reflecting on past experiences as well as their current lives. Philip and Hendry’s study positively frames the necessity of this study by recognizing a reciprocal value of mentoring for mentors and emphasizing the importance of having the mentors’ perspectives.

Centered around the knowledge of mentorship history, mentor relationship models, social context, and perspectives on mentoring, this study hopes to add another qualitative approach to mentorship research that builds upon what is understood of successful and unsuccessful mentor relationships. The next sections provide details on what data was collected to perform this study, as well as the methods used to collect and analyze the interview data.

METHODS

For this study, I relied on field observations and interviews with Black male mentors and mentees within the New Haven area. Throughout this paper, these mentors, mentees, and the programs they participated in will be referred to using pseudonyms. The mentors I interviewed came from two Black male mentoring programs. Their interviews were supplemented in the data sample with interviews of mentees who work with at least one of the mentors in my sample.⁶ Field observations took place over two months in January and February of 2017.

Specifically, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with a mentor and two of his mentees who are part of a community mentoring program that will be called STRIVE. In addition, I conducted one focus group interview with five Black male college students who participate in the Association of Black Men's (ABN) mentoring program for Black boys at a local public PreK-8 school in grades six through eight. To best explain why these individuals serve as a convenience sample for Black male mentor experiences, I will first provide a clearer description of the structure of their respective programs and activities.

STRIVE is a New Haven-based community mentoring program that has been serving “primarily African-American” boys from the city of New Haven since 2014. The founder of STRIVE, who will be referred to as Jason, holds meetings bi-weekly on Saturdays within the building of a non-profit organization. This non-profit serves children of incarcerated parents and family members during the weekdays. Jason decided on this space because the non-profit is directed by his brother. The mentoring program typically serves boys from the ages of 14 to 18, but also has a few boys who are slightly younger. STRIVE centers on academic achievement, exposure to new opportunities, and development of communication and social skills. As the sole

⁶ Originally, I planned to have a collection of interviews from mentors who work at two or three New Haven mentoring programs. However, after difficulties in planning meetings with each program, I shifted to working with this sample due to successful communication.

mentor for STRIVE, Jason leads discussions on current events, plans trips outside of the meeting space, and has one-on-one conversations with the mentees, who he refers to as “scholars.” The events and resources that STRIVE utilizes come from what is available in the non-profit organization’s building and what Jason buys with his own money. He does not request funding or grants because of his concerns of being “pigeon-toed to certain type of activities and spending time doing paperwork, as opposed to spending time with the kids.” However, Jason’s brother tries to look for funding for the program when he has time. With his own money, Jason finances trips out of New Haven, food at the meetings, and gifts to award the scholars’ academic achievements, thus taking on most of the financial costs for the mentees.

The scholars who I chose to interview from STRIVE were those who attended the meeting where I took in-depth field observation notes. The attendance at STRIVE varies for each meeting, but there are about three or four scholars who consistently attend meetings. These students are those with whom Jason had a particularly close relationship with when I first met him. One scholar, named Riley here, was marked by Jason as a consistent attendant of meetings and as someone who is very invested in participating. Riley is twelve years old and is in seventh grade at the same school where the ABN mentors run their program. Therefore, Riley is both mentored by Jason and by the college-aged mentors who I will describe in detail later. However, his comments in the interview are centered on his time at STRIVE. His family is more involved in the program than other scholars, which further supports his constant attendance. The other scholar I interviewed was an eighteen-year-old named Malik who takes classes online to fulfill high school credits and works at McDonald’s. Malik was one of the early scholars in the program when Jason first started it. I was introduced to him when he came by to visit after a long hiatus from attending regular meetings. Malik and Jason originally met when Jason was his probation officer for an

incident at Malik's high school. After Malik got through his probation, Jason continued to support him as a mentor through STRIVE.

In interviewing both Riley and Malik, I am accessing a mentee's perspective on being mentored by a Black man that is important for understanding Black male mentor experiences. Rather than solely relying on mentor perspectives, I believe adding the perspectives of mentored Black boys allows me to analyze decisions made by mentors through the lens of individuals who must experience the results of those decisions. Beyond deepening this analysis of Black male mentor perspectives, I believe Riley and Malik represent different types of mentees with relationships to the same mentor. By mapping the similarities and differences in how they think about their relationships with Jason and time with STRIVE, I can explore what makes their relationships last in different ways. Both scholars express interest in and appreciation of Jason in their lives, but have different connections to him that helps me consider relationships as defined by their formation rather than by their outcomes.

The mentorship program within the Association of Black Men (ABN) is comprised of college-aged mentors who attend a private research university in the Northeast and are members of their undergraduate student group for Black men. The five ABN mentors are part of a team of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors who mentor at a local public PreK-8 school in New Haven that teaches mostly Black and Latino students. These mentors spend one hour each Friday mentoring a group of fifteen Black boys from sixth to eighth grade who are selected by teachers and administrators within the school. These boys range from academically-adept students to academically- or disciplinarily-challenged students. The meetings with these students have a curriculum that is planned by one of the mentors; they can range from being solely group meetings to smaller group or one-on-one discussions. While the ABN mentors are not assigned specific mentees, they build individual and small group relationships with students throughout the year.

The five ABN mentors I interviewed represent different levels of practice as mentors within the school and express varying experiences of being mentored before and during college. They all also have a position on the board of the ABN, meaning they are invested in the work of supporting Black men at their university through that organization. In addition to the planned curriculum, these mentors will also take the mentees on large group trips to their university and will check on the mentees' academic progress. While the ABN mentors are not specifically academic tutors in the K-8 school, they focus on providing inspiration for academic achievement and on presenting a positive example of students pursuing their interests at a good educational institution. By featuring the voices of these five ABN mentors, I can more deeply understand the challenges and decisions of mentoring from the perspectives of less-seasoned mentors than adults like Jason. Their presence creates a multi-generational sample of Black men that incorporates adult mentors, youth mentees, and college students who have only recently switched from mentee to mentor. Such a sample expands the Black male mentor perspectives as it includes the discussion of establishing relationships built off of a model of previous mentorship. With this all in mind, these individuals and their work towards the personal growth of Black boys qualifies them as a strong sample to analyze my research questions regarding Black male mentors' challenges, perceptions, and decisions in mentor relationships.

To learn information from these individuals, I use a mixed methods approach that is entirely qualitative. Mixed methods are the best way of collecting and interpreting this data because it allows me to build a larger contextual understanding of where mentoring can take place for some of these participants. Specifically, performing field observations and taking field notes allowed me to see real-world interactions that the participants mentioned were common in their interviews. In addition, when this understanding is established, it helps in mapping moments when the mentor relationships are impacted by or work against what is happening in the mentor and mentee's social

environment. As mentioned, field observations were performed at STRIVE at two meetings in January and February of 2017 to provide a social context for the relationships that Riley and Malik formed with Jason. The first field observation was informational, allowing me to see the space and understand the regular programming and interactions between Jason, scholars and the overall space; extensive notes were not taken at this meeting. The second field observation involved extensive notes that were taken on an electronic device and later elaborated upon after I left that meeting. Since STRIVE is comfortable with the use of technology in their meetings to extend the educational opportunities, the presence of my smartphone for typing notes was not disruptive to their regular interactions in a way a large pad and paper might have been. My findings and discussion reference solely information gleaned from the second field observation in which reliable and detailed notes were kept.

The semi-structured interviews with STRIVE participants were recorded and later transcribed. They were loosely structured on a set of about five basic questions, but the actual conversations would adapt based on the answers provided by the interviewees. It should be noted that these interviews ranged in length from twenty minutes to an hour, due to how the interviewees responded and due to the varied language they used to speak on these mentoring relationships. While mentors have had the experience of talking through mentoring methods and practices with others, the mentees are not part of the larger curricular and methodological development. Therefore, while mentors enjoyed speaking on specific details that they actively search for when sculpting mentor relationships, the mentees discussed moments and generalized feelings toward the what they see in their interactions with a mentor. The age variation in this sample of interviews not only provides a larger framework for understanding Black male mentors, but also presents the differences in how one can reflect on mentoring relationships based on their age, level of education, and amount of time to reflect on said relationships. Nonetheless, the responses in these

interviews were deeply insightful and showcased an interest on the part of the STRIVE participants to advocate for mentoring.

The focus group interview with the ABN mentors was also recorded and transcribed. While the questions used for this interview were extremely similar to those used for the STRIVE participants, I altered the wording to allow for the group to answer and reflect off of each other's responses. By facilitating a conversation between the five ABN mentors and myself, I heard a series of individual perspectives while also identifying points at which their experiences and thoughts converged. With these field observations and in-depth interviews, I drew out a series of narratives on the experience of being a Black male mentor that fell into larger themes for analysis.

The themes for this study emerged from content analysis of the interview transcripts. By searching for similar sentiments that the participants stated, I connected their voices to larger ideas that represent a common thread between their narratives on mentorship. In order to do this, I read through each transcript and indicated specific statements that reflected on experiences or thoughts that participants believed were important in the consideration of a mentor relationship. I did not choose to identify the repetition of specific terms between participants, because they are all coming from different ages and expertise backgrounds. Once all the excerpts in the transcripts were identified, I counted how many fell within loose themes and re-evaluated my original set of themes in reaction to significant variations within the responses for each group. The final set of themes unifies general ideas, while also maintaining necessary variations within them that establish a valuable narrative on the complexities of mentorship.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged in the data that represent important facets of the mentor relationship for mentors and mentees: Mentoring Format, Identity Formation, Points of Convergence, Commitment, Challenging Narratives, and Inspiration to Mentor. Each theme is drawn from the

experiences and ideas expressed by those I interviewed and further substantiated by their materialization in moments at STRIVE meetings. Excerpts from the interviews provide detail for these themes, thus providing the richness of each participant's response and the core concepts that they shared. While some field note excerpts are presented in explaining these themes, they are used more throughout the text to provide context without disrupting the narratives shared.

Mentoring Format

Upon first observing the STRIVE meetings, I noticed how Jason balanced interactions with individual scholars and the group of scholars throughout their time together. This switch between mentoring modes indicated a frequent theme of mentoring format, in that it showed Jason utilizing both group and one-on-one mentoring methods as the only adult working with these scholars. On some occasions, mentor-mentee relationships would present themselves through cooperative interactions. For example, my field observations discovered this one-on-one moment between Riley and Jason at the start of the day:

Jason takes photos of some of the certificates and goes on his laptop to try to post them on Facebook. He calls Riley from the white table over to him at the meeting room table to help him figure out how to share the post. Riley, now with jacket off, goes over and says a few comments on what he should click. They run into another problem. [...] They stare at the screen together trying to figure out what to do in order to make the post. - STRIVE Meeting February 2017 Fieldnotes

Here, Jason relies on Riley's personal knowledge of technology to solve a problem together that they both care about - posting pictures of certificates that the scholars were getting that morning. Within STRIVE, such a relationship also led to teaching moments in which Jason would instruct a scholar on a certain issue one of them brought up. This is most evident in the interactions between Malik and Jason, which Malik commented on by saying "Jason influences me, like teaching me about Black history, about Black now, Black today. And on my own I just, I look. I like history so

I like to go back and look at history books.” While Jason intervenes in Malik’s life through providing an education on Black history, Malik takes that intervention and extends it through his personal education.

Both Riley and Malik’s experiences exemplify the importance of maintaining a strong connection within the mentor-mentee pair that relies on sharing. These interactions show that a relationship relies on the mentor knowing what both actors can share with each other and creating moments to share that further empowers the mentee. Jason knows of Riley’s abilities with social media, so he feels comfortable asking Riley to share his strength with him. Malik has an interest in history, so Jason shares his knowledge on Black history and current events to offer Malik an education that resonates with what he wants to learn. Will of the ABM mentors recognizes the value of individual mentor-mentee relationships and believes they “do need to have more individualized time because not everybody needs the same lessons.” When Will and the other ABM mentors understand that each mentee “has different problems, issues, [and] areas of improvement,” they express interest in moving towards a model of mentoring that allows for each mentee to share their specific experience and be guided through them. Through these interviews, it became clear that sharing knowledge between mentors and mentees is easier when mentors hone into the individual desires and concerns of each mentee.

The mentors and mentees presented mixed feelings towards the format of group mentoring as it allowed for larger lessons to be shared, but fewer bonds to be made. Trey, an ABM mentor, strongly indicated a negative view on the group mentoring model:

That's the part that sort of kills me about mentoring. How a majority of the time we end up having these general discussions. Like I wish it was just like one-on-one or just you and your mentor. Sort of like a big brother kind of thing. Cuz I find that, at least looking at the kids, whenever the setting is that of a discussion, sort of a round table, that's when they look the most disengaged. - Trey

Many of his ABM mentors agreed, going as far to say that with group mentoring “the accountability isn’t there yet.” When a group format does not provide space for engagement and accountability on the part of their mentees, it promotes apathy towards the whole process of mentoring. The lack of connections not only prevents sharing moments from happening, but also leaves mentors feeling frustrated about not passing on information that they find valuable to their mentees.

However, Will pushed back against this assumption that the group mentoring format did not serve these mentees by indicating a moment when one mentee talked about retaliating against a girl if she ever hit him:

For example, last year, a kid made a joke about the fact that he would never let a girl hit them. And if a girl hit them, he would hit them back. And we had a lesson plan scheduled, but then we said "We're gonna drop that. We need to discuss this." And the whole mentoring session turned into a discussion of our relationship with women, how we should treat them, and why it's important to do so. – Will

During that mentoring session, the ABM mentors utilized the initial group format of their program to teach a lesson that they believed all the mentees should hear. Here, they specifically relied on discussions as the group format gave space for each mentor and mentee to share their opinions. In STRIVE, Jason appreciates similar moments of group discussion, seeing them as moments when “they learn the skills of communicating, where you just sometimes talk it out.” Even though the group format prevents the formation of close mentor-mentee bonds, it does allow communication skills to be developed as mentees think through issues that may be universal amongst them.

The mentoring format is not limited to the methods of speaking with mentees, as many of the participants mentioned a focus on activities and exposure. Speaking about STRIVE’s trip to an engineering maker space, Malik describes how “just seeing all the technology, [...] it just made me want to take everything apart and put it back together.” He felt that the trip exposed him to a space that matched well with his interests in technology. In a similar vein, the ABM mentors pride

themselves on having a diverse array of academic interests because they can expose mentees to these interests. Will expressed his excitement due to the fact that he could say to mentees, “Look, this person right here is into STEM, this person right here is into finance. We're gonna go into political science and try to impact the world from these different ways.” In both Malik and Will’s accounts, the core idea of revealing a new opportunity or perspective through exposure is deeply valued. This exposure, done through group or one-on-one mentoring, helps mentees think of tangible interests to possibly pursue. In addition, it allows mentors to feel empowered in what they can uniquely offer a mentee. An interest in exposing mentees to new ideas or opportunities is imperative in maintaining attention and acknowledging budding desires.

Activities and trips like the one Malik took with STRIVE also provide moments of lightheartedness within the mentor group that balance the seriousness of lessons. For example, the group burst into laughter during their STRIVE meeting when both Malik and Riley recalled an unfortunate event at a restaurant in New York City after seeing a play:

Riley, looking slightly confused at both Jason and Malik then says, “Oh, do you mean the cockroach?” Malik gets louder in his comments, saying how he saw a roach on the ground. Riley then interjects, also laughing and mentioning how you could see a few throughout the restaurant. Jason tells them that its fine to bring it up because it’s “not our restaurant” and laughs along with them. I then watch as Malik and Riley, who were not really talking to each other prior, laugh and talk back and forth about the food being good, but the presence of roaches in [the restaurant] being a problem. - STRIVE Meeting February 2017 Fieldnotes

This situation is connected to an exposure experience in regards to the play, but it mainly presents the value of humor as an inherent part of the mentoring relationship and space. Brian, an ABM mentor, mentioned that “there’s a lot of roasting that goes on [and] I think laughing together is somewhat of a bridge.” ‘Roasting’ is when people make harmless jokes about each other in a large

group, in a way humbling each other. Fun, humorous moments proved necessary throughout these participants' experiences as it helped them enjoy each other's company and feel comfortable enough to laugh together. While laughter cannot be intentionally placed into a mentoring format, the comfort built between mentors and mentees means it is inherently present. So, laughter can be seen as a marker of a certain level of comfort between mentors and mentees that is important in sustaining the mentoring relationship.

It is clear that while group mentoring is not held in as high regard as one-on-one mentoring, having a balance between the two formats leaves space for mentees to be comfortable with others and allows for more mentees to learn lessons applicable to each of their lives. Most mentors agreed that a mix between these formats is best for serving their mentees and expressed hope in creating that ideal mentoring space. The main concern that mentors have with relating to mentees is mitigated by the actions that take place in both formats. Specifically, discussions, activities, moments of exposure, and humor strengthen the value that both mentors and mentees place on their experiences. These mentors and mentees approach the idea of building attachment to one another through these methods of mentoring by learning values, sharing interests, and finding joy.

Identity Formation

Consistently, mentors and mentees center activities, discussions, and interactions with each other around personal growth and identity formation. When it comes to pursuing future goals, both Malik and Jason enjoy speaking on their conversations about Malik's possible music career. Malik expresses that he produces and writes music and has "a lot going on right now" in regards to his musical work. He acknowledges though that Jason has "always told me to make music secondary and always go towards something that, you know, work with my hands." Jason helped Malik get certification in plumbing, which he connects to a larger lesson of having "something that

you have a foundation on while you're working on the music." Jason expands on the conversations that he and Malik has by saying:

We constantly have those conversations. It's just so ironic, that kid is a very bright kid. [...] This kid could probably go into any aspect of engineering or anything. And you try not to allow them to limit themselves and pigeon-toe themselves. A lot of kids wanna go into the music industry. And they see themselves as having immediate success in the music industry, maybe because the images that they see, this guy went from nothing to something. [...] And one of the things I wanted to do with that particular kid was to focus a little more on his intellectual capacity and his ability to do more. And to allow that music to be like a hobby. - Jason

The discussions that Jason and Malik have help Malik think through his aspirations as well as the feasibility of certain goals. Jason recognizes the trends that a lot of youth take towards a profitable music career and wants to protect Malik by guiding him towards stable forms of employment and support before he dedicates all his energy to music. Working through future plans and aspirations helps mentees feel more assured about a path in life. Malik highlights this sense of assuredness in the way he believes he is on "a way different path" from his peers because he gets to move forward with plans and a vision. Envisioning pursuits helps mentees also envision the identities and roles they want to take on later in life, thus providing them a model based on their interests and molded by an adult mentor with lived experience.

Aspirational growth is also accompanied by one's growth personally and emotionally. For example, Riley viewed himself as someone who followed other people, "but not since I'm in the program I see that I'm not in those situations anymore." This was a response to a question on how he thought he changed through interactions with Jason and STRIVE. As mentioned, Jason emphasizes relationships where mentees can share themselves and communicate. It is within this open mentoring space and relationship where Riley shifted from following others to acknowledging

his own identity. With that said, Riley still appreciates that his personal growth stems from the group mentoring dynamic as well as the relationship he has with Jason. He goes on to say that “we talk about ourselves and things that we do and things that we don't do and just find out more about each other. So, that helps us find more about ourselves.” It is through openness with the group that he finds more comfort discovering what he appreciates about himself. His personal growth and feeling of self-worth comes from being provided that space to just speak on what matters to him. When mentors like Jason help mentees center their interests in conversations, they encourage self-reflection that leads to a better understanding of who they are or who they hope to become.

As I read through the interviews and noticed conversations on growth and identity formation, I noted that, in comparison to Jason, the ABM mentors felt less sure about helping their mentees grow. Jason, on the other hand, strongly believes he has an impact on the way his mentees view themselves:

I pretty much say without trying to sound arrogant. I feel as though I reach a lot of kids, enough kids to just have them think about things. And to feel comfortable with who they are. And to just have some aspirations to constantly, they call it "stay on your grind." - Jason

He feels confident that the scholars in STRIVE are getting a necessary and effective opportunity to learn about their own perspective on the world and on themselves. Will does not have the same trust in the ABM mentors' effects as “we don't have the power to make sure that they are doing what we ask. Because we're not their parents, we're not their big brothers.” This sentiment was repeated by Brian who said, “I don't know what we look like to the boys” in the program. As nods of agreement filled the room during these statements, it was clear that something was causing the ABM mentors to lack confidence in their effectiveness.

The differences between Jason and the ABM mentors are clear: Jason is an adult with experience working as a youth probation officer and child services provider, while the ABM

mentors are college students who mostly come from privileged backgrounds. Their identities fully impact their perception of success in mentoring youth as they rely on prior expertise and experience with kids to assess their skills in youth development. Jason's work experience helps him feel qualified to support several types of youth; the ABM mentors have limited experiences with mentorship and feel their identities as mentors are still forming. So, in thinking about the growth of mentees through any mentoring format, it is important to recognize how much the mentor trusts themselves to initiate that growth. The ABM mentors do not think they play as much of a role in their mentees lives as family members, but Jason knows there are instances when he is asked to be a father figure for a mentee. These differences in the mentors' identities based on age and experience mitigate how positive growth and identity development can occur in the first place for mentees. An expanded view on the mentor's perception of their abilities helps explain this portion of mentor relationships more clearly as we now see the impact their insecurities of ability have on them.

Points of Convergence

When speaking with the participants about their use of activities and discussions to encourage growth, it became clear that the success of those interactions depended on how often they established points of convergence between interests. In its simplest form, these points could be when a mentor and mentee have similar interests or life experiences. For example, Luke, an ABM mentor, lost his father at a young age and has spent most of his time with mentees who had "an absent father figure" like he did. Noticing that this was a personal connection, Luke has relied on that as a way to establish trust between himself and his mentees. They approach him about his life circumstances and he offers his reflections in addition to "the other great things going on that you can focus on." With this entry point of converging lives, Luke develops a relationship where

mentor and mentee can connect and continue to find similarities, or start to branch off and approach new ideas.

Malik shows appreciation for how Jason converges with his interests by harping on Jason's savviness with younger people:

Jason, he knows people my age. He knows the youth. And he knows exactly how to get to them. Whether it be us watching a movie, or "come on, we're going out." He always finds a way to get to us. No matter who we are, how we think. He always finds a way. - Malik

Jason's ability to understand the interests of people younger than him is valuable because it helps his mentees feel noticed and acknowledged for what they appreciate. Malik expresses trust that Jason can "always find a way" in connecting with people his age, which means he has a firm view of Jason as a positive youth mentor and advocate in his mind. Based on Luke and Malik's accounts of convergence, finding connections on interest or lived experience is definitely part of the process of attachment between mentor and mentee as it forms a baseline of trust. Such a process requires moments for mentors and mentees to talk about their personal lives before any true bonds start to form.

Convergence is not limited to sharing interests, as it also manifests itself when there is an initial lack of understanding between mentors and mentees. Kevin, an ABM mentor, mentioned an incident during a basketball event in which he had to stop a mentee from bullying two other mentees. At first, Kevin experienced a lot of pushback from the mentee when he advised him to stop as the mentee "just didn't care" about what Kevin had to say. However, the mentee started to understand the problem when Kevin said, "Alright, well, you see that you're bringing negatives into the world and bringing zero positive. Or maybe marginal amounts of positive. This is just objectively useless." This statement, which relies heavily on the idea of utility, resonated with the mentee and caused him to stop bullying the others. Kevin framed this mentee's actions such that

they appeared useless for the world altogether, possibly appealing to how the logical framework with which this mentee thinks.

Jason establishes similar convergence by providing rewards for scholars' academic performance. Riley reflects on the impact of having rewards when he is not willing to pursue academic achievement:

Um, not as much the awards, just like having him, like having like a supporter. And him encouraging me to keep going forward. Cuz like they'll be times when I don't wanna keep going but then it's like I'll get rewarded, so yeah. So, I just like, that pushes me to go harder.
- Riley

In this moment, Riley balances the tangible rewards, which tend to be electronics that Jason pays for himself, with the intangible support from Jason that is inherent in him being his mentor. In all, Riley chooses to converge his interest in maintaining these rewards with Jason's interest in Riley having good grades. It is through this convergence that Riley also appreciates the value of doing well academically because Jason places the upmost importance on it. Kevin and Jason successfully nuance the use of convergence by reframing conflicts between them and mentees into similar goals and intentions. This form of convergence goes beyond attachment and serves the teaching portion of mentorship as it guides mentees on how to reevaluate difficult situations and respond to them appropriately.

While Kevin and Jason displayed creative ways of dealing with conflict through convergence, finding a central place of agreement is not always guaranteed. Clashes between mentors and mentees that do not lead to a connection in many ways can stem from the circumstances that one of these actors face outside the mentor relationship. Jason recalls an argument with a mentee during a meeting at STRIVE regarding caring for their mothers:

So, this other kid, because of what he was doing in the community, he was out in the streets doing this that and the other. Him and his mother was having a hard time, struggling with

their relationship. So, instead of focusing on the task at hand, he started picking on this other kid. And it was like blatant where he would call him names and laugh at him in front of the whole group. So, maybe, like two or three occasions I was like "Listen, we can't do that here. We're not gonna disrespect him." And it just didn't work. And the more I tried to intervene, the worse it became. So, I was like "Listen, you have to leave." And he was like "I don't care, I don't want to be a part of this." So, I had to dismiss this kid. - Jason

Jason's dismissal of this mentee is also within the context of keeping the mentoring space safe and positive for other students. It is difficult to assess exactly how that mentee was feeling in the moment, though it is evident his own personal struggles with his mother triggered frustration in an activity about mothers. The other mentors and mentees do not mention such difficult clashes of intentions as this, but this example serves to explain why certain topics within a mentoring space or relationships may be hard to approach. Returning to the discussion on group versus one-on-one mentoring, this mentee's experience may have been different if he and Jason had had the opportunity to speak on it as a pair and not in front of the group. In addition, Jason cannot control the full experience that the mentee has outside of STRIVE, so that places a barrier on how much Jason can converge interests with him and build trust. Youth who struggle with sensitive personal or emotional circumstances are thus harder to reach as they must build more trust and closer bonds in order to talk through the issues that bother them.

A final form of convergence straddles the line of positive and negative in terms of how it impacts mentoring trends at-large. Luke mentioned that he typically gravitates towards mentees who "I think have promise. Or who I identify have certain traits that I know I could help to amplify for the better. And then I think they'll be successful if I amplify those because maybe I think those traits are similar to ones I have." Here, Luke is honest in showing a preference for those mentees who he feels are most like him because he trusts in his ability to guide people with similar goals, interests, and personalities as him. This is positive in that it inspires him to mentor, but it does

cause him and other mentors to think about who they are trying to assist and who they are leaving unattended. As students at a top-tier university, the ABM mentors hold traits that are viewed by some parts of society as exceptional enough to get them to college. Therefore, when Will says he “would love to have a relationship with a mentee that I really click with,” he indicates an interest in a mentee who could someday follow a similar path as him. This part of converging interests is important in relation to the previous discussion of mentees from difficult backgrounds. As one population of Black boys who are believed to have promise are supported, another population that deals with tumultuous situations outside of mentorship is forgotten or avoided because of the difficulty of connecting with them. Rather than place blame on mentors for this imbalance, it is important to consider that mentors who try their best, like Jason, still need help in order to establish trust and build those relationships that are more difficult to form.

Convergence, in all its forms, is valuable for mentors to understand. It signifies the start of a trusting relationship or the moment when an idea makes sense to a mentee. In other situations, it can signify preference and self-selection, which leads to those individuals who cannot converge well to be avoided. Mentors recognize the challenge of reaching convergence and hope to support all youth, even those who they do not feel capable of fully helping. The ideal mentor relationship is harder to attain when factors outside of the mentor and mentee’s control limit the ways in which those actors interact and bond.

Commitment

Commitment emerged as a key factor in controlling the success of a mentor relationship. Many mentors in the sample indicated that other adults heavily impacted the likelihood of a mentee continuing their relationship or participation in the mentoring program. Jason, on several occasions, spoke to his frustrations with parents who would rarely stay involved in the mentoring program:

It's always tough because the thing that aggravates me the most is not the kids, but the parents. Sometimes the parents take for granted what we're doing or don't appreciate it enough. So, it's not a priority for the parents to make sure their kids are here and attending the program. And you know sometimes with these parents, we invite them out and they don't come out. We try coffee, we try conversation, we try anything. I have a few parents I've never even met personally. I call them on the phone, talk to them. It's just frustrating that you feel as though the parents don't get the value of what we're trying to do. Or how impactful we can be. – Jason

This excerpt is one of many where Jason explains why STRIVE has had trouble taking on exciting opportunities, such as travel or providing scholars with achievement certificates. The STRIVE meeting I attended was meant to be an awards ceremony for those scholars who achieved honors, but most of the scholars receiving awards did not attend. Since most children that attend STRIVE require rides, it is dependent on their parents to bring them to the program or to tell Jason that he should pick them up from their home. Jason expresses his frustration with the understanding that many parents view STRIVE as a “safe space” for their child to be during the weekend while they focus on other priorities. However, for Jason to fully mentor these scholars, he wants parents to take his work seriously and get their children involved as much as possible.

Riley’s attachment to Jason is reflected in him sharing these sentiments, but from the belief that the kids are choosing not to attend. Throughout his interview, Riley expressed that “a lot of kids don't come as much as they should be and I feel like they should be coming more because it's a good thing that's going on in the community.” Riley’s mother is very committed to bringing him to the program and, when she cannot, asks Jason to pick him up each weekend. While this is admirable, it seems that Riley’s experience is unique and that it is hard to maintain consistency when scholars’ parents are not as invested or available. For both Jason and Riley, commitment presents itself in one’s ability to invest in the mission of growth and attend the mentoring program

as much as possible. Riley appreciates his connection with Jason because he has had so much time to form it. However, other scholars have not had that time and do not fully understand the benefits of that relationship. By extension, their parents do not understand and prevent them entry into this chance for growth.

The ABM mentors have similarly found barriers to their mentorship because of school administrators not communicating with them about their mentees' progress and needs. Trey introduced his frustrations with a story about a mentee who disappeared during the school year:

For example, there's this one kid named W who was a really nice kid. He was coming to the first, he came to like the first two or three meetings. [...] Then all of sudden he stops appearing. None of the kids talk about him. Then, I think two meetings ago, we find out that he got kicked out of the school and we weren't told anything about it. And I guess the lack of a third party to inform us about things, not necessarily a suspension or getting kicked out, but also just like having them communicate. Or maybe us wanting to communicate. I don't know. I think it goes both ways. - Trey

This story indicated to me how disconnected the mentors and the school administrators are, as well as how unclear it is to either party the information that should be shared. Trey understandably is upset, but also places blame on himself and the other mentors for not asking about this mentee in the first place. On both sides, there is fault in nobody being accountable for this mentee's whereabouts and ability to continue being mentored. This differs from Jason's concerns as it focuses on poor communication on the part of both mentors and other adults; Jason puts in a lot of effort to communicate and simply gets no response. Either way, there is a lag or total erosion of mentor relationships and opportunities when this communication collapses. With it, mentees collapse into circumstances where they have a harder time trusting the efficacy of mentors in their lives.

The ABM mentors' insecurities about their effectiveness as mentors was better contextualized after learning about the extent to which they can interact with their mentees. Their mentoring program, which is an hour a week at the mentees' middle school, is truly limited to that time frame. Luke explained that being able to see a mentee outside of the program hours was "a minority experience." Many of the ABM mentors agreed with this. On occasion, Luke tries to push against this trend:

And for me, it was as simple as going through my closet and realizing my old club basketball jersey, they ordered a medium and I've never been a medium in college. So, giving him the practice jersey. [...] At some point you just have to make certain points of investment, particularly if you can't make them in the way that you would often like. Which, for me would be face time, spending more time there. - Luke

Luke recognizes that it would be better if he got to spend more time with this particular mentee, but knows that his schedule as a college student only affords him limited interactions. Instead, Luke tries to figure out more tangible ways to remember his mentee's interests and ensures his mentee knows that he is thinking of him. There is value in appreciating a mentee like this and showing them care, but the limited interactions makes it hard to create fulfilling and lasting relationships.

The ABM mentors realize this issue and even knew of a solution. Kevin believed that "if we were to really do it, it would have to be like our only extracurricular because it's such a massive endeavor." They all acknowledged how big of a task it is to be a close confidant and advocate for a mentee and that their busy college schedules may not allow for that task to be completed. Luke had a sobering reflection that one mentee texted him during their university's spring break asking, "Are you guys coming?" For all the mentors, it is difficult to imagine that there are mentees who truly want them to be there to continue forming relationships, but their schedules and the limited hours of their program prevent that from happening. The commitment to the mentor relationship

is present from both mentors and mentees in an emotional sense, but physical presence and time are more tangible barriers to reaching the relationship's full potential.

Challenging Narratives

As our conversations shifted away from structures of mentor relationships and into their identities as Black men, the theme of challenging narratives of Black manhood emerged from many of the participants. For example, Malik viewed the group aspect of STRIVE as “surprising because normally like when you see a group of young Black males, there’s always a problem some way.” In his experience, a gathering of Black men typically indicated trouble, particularly between each other. His comments reflect his living situation within a Black neighborhood where he has viewed harmful or problematic interactions between Black men as common. While I cannot speak to the exact circumstances for the moments Malik has seen between Black men, it is possible to assume that their responses to upsetting situations are impacted by the lack of safety and comfort they receive from police officers and the government in their neighborhood. So, when Malik is looking at STRIVE with that context in mind, he observes something rare; something that challenges his assumptions and socialized narratives of Black men in groups.

Malik’s response is important when compared to Jason’s pedagogy around Black male identity for STRIVE. Jason believes that “no matter how we present or how we perceive ourselves, somebody will have another perception of us. We can’t control that, but basically we need to control how we present for ourselves.” Jason knows that he is working with Black men who may be viewed as dangerous, disruptive, or defeated by society. So, he tries to get them together and teach them moral lessons and communication skills to help them mold an image of themselves that fights against the assumptions people will make about them. Malik sees the group of STRIVE scholars and sees a group that transcends even his learned assumptions, even though he has been around Black people all of his life. The creation of a positive space for Black men to be open and

vulnerable allows them to see beyond the stereotypes that have been placed on them or that they place on themselves. In reference to Riley's previous appreciation for his individual growth, there is appreciation for a group of individuals as opposed to appreciation for a group of people who all match specific assumptions. That is, everyone gets to act without worrying about fitting a certain stereotype or form of group-think because they are encouraged to find what they value about themselves.

The positivity of challenging these narratives comes with a negative price on the way mentors converse with mentees. Kevin pointed out that "for better or worse, probably for worse, the explicit commentary on Black manhood had to be a negative thing." By this, he means their discussions regarding Black manhood focused more on "what could go wrong if you take this route as a Black man" than on positive aspects of being part of that identity. This negative language and deficit approach to speaking on Black manhood is something that the ABM mentors worried about more than Jason or his mentees. They suspected that it was because "they're not comparing to the whiteness that we might be just because of the school we're going to." The ABM mentors attend a predominantly white institution, so they have had more instances where they had to engage their race in comparison to the privileges of white peers on campus. Jason and his mentees navigate mostly Black spaces, so their thoughts on blackness differ. However, the conversations that all these participants mention having are related to creating a positive image for oneself that opposes the assumed negative image placed on Black men.

The true difference appeared to be the central goals that guide these mentors through their programs. The ABM mentors emphasize "that you don't see Black people in the same places of power that you see in this country, their white counterparts." Therefore, as Will explains, "it's really important for us to try to be positive influences and add value [...], if in any way at all, to uplift our community." Each mentor is guided by the knowledge of inequality for Black men,

especially after entering a space where their inequality is visibly amplified by a mostly white campus. So, they feel motivated to help young Black men avoid this feeling of inequality and pursue great achievements. The shock they had from entering white spaces motivates their mentorship, which means when they have negative conversations on Black manhood with mentees, they feel like they are adding to the inequality as opposed to pushing against it.

Jason, on the other hand, is motivated by a frustration with the limitation of race as a categorization tool for people. He mentioned that he and his wife saw diverse groups of children when visiting Europe and had the following reflection:

I often tell the kids, the first time I went to Europe when I was in college. And I seen some young kids, there was always a diverse group of kids. And people in general, my wife and I, we was just so amazed by that because I think one of the things you see in this country a lot is that we're always paired off by racial makeup or hip-hop group or this that and the other. And I think it's somewhat allowed us to be limited, when we're not getting exposure or learning things that we can. - Jason

Jason has seen what he views as an ideal community of diversity and believes that such an image is only possible when people learn to think of themselves outside of race. This does not mean he thinks in a colorblind fashion, as he has emphasized before an importance in serving Black boys and the Black community. However, it is present in his and Riley's statements about developing a better understanding of oneself that he aims for mentees to establish personal identities and ways of communicating with people both in and out of their racial categories. So, when he reflects on the negative lived experiences of Black men, he advises them to just try to be "good kids" and not put themselves in troublesome situations. He never promises that people will see them for who they want to be, but he emphasizes guiding them towards making that image for themselves and challenging the limitation of fitting any Black stereotype.

This theme represents a unique challenge to forming mentor relationships because it acknowledges variations on how mentors view their “shared” identities, thus complicating what can even be considered a true match. The ABM mentors are clearly liked by their mentees, but have different reflections on blackness that the mentees have yet to have and may never have. Jason is admired by his mentees, but thinks about the idea of a positive, diverse space for children that his mentees do not always inhabit. These are not criticisms on these mentors’ intentions, rather acknowledgements of how much the mentors’ and mentees’ identities shift possible points of convergence on the topic of race. They indicate a need to look deeply into the core goals mentors want mentees to achieve, especially if identities of social marginalization impact their daily lives and their ability to pursue those goals.

Inspiration to Mentor

The participants’ inspirations for becoming mentors emerged in all of the interviews and helped in developing a base understanding of why they continue mentoring despite all the complications and barriers they tend to face. For Jason, he cited several male figures as imperative in his development as a child:

Well, you know, blessed to have a father. I lost my father a few years back. My parents were divorced, but we always had a relationship. [...] And being that my mother is super religious, we also grew up in church. We seen a lotta positive mentors in church: pastors, deacons, bus drivers who drive the bus, camp counselors, and so on. So, we were always in close contact to positive males who had really impact our lives. – Jason

Becoming a mentor seemed almost inherent based on his personal biography as well as his professional background in child and family services. Jason represents the continuation of a mentorship cycle: he and his brother had the benefit of several male figures and now they have created a space to serve as male figures for youth within their community. He knows that simply telling his mentees to become mentors one day will not continue that cycle. Rather, he believes in

that “sometimes you don’t learn [your lessons] until late on in life.” He believes that the lessons on character, aspirations, and communication will slowly reveal themselves when his mentees go through life. In adulthood, he has realized that his mentors helped him long after they were in his presence. This belief that lessons from mentorship are learned later in life further explain Jason’s confidence in his effect on youth; he trusts that if he cannot see his positive impact yet, he will see it in their adulthood because the same happened for him.

Despite his intention to have his mentees learn their lessons later, Malik shows great interest in being a mentor in the future. He asked me in our interview if I would come help with STRIVE if I was not doing this study, and I happily expressed interest in helping after seeing how much work Jason does. In response, Malik said “I’m tryna help out too. It’s not really like a help thing. We’re all just like together, basically.” He sees STRIVE as a group endeavor between Jason and all the scholars, so he wants to continue pushing the group forward. In addition to his desire to help, he presented a prowess for mentorship during the STRIVE meeting when an energetic boy of primary school age was dropped off at the program. Malik took interest in the boy and said “seeing that one kid, he reminds me a lot about myself. [...] He’s able to do the things that I wanted to do, but never was able to. [...] He should take a martial arts thing because that’s gonna teach him the discipline he needs.” Malik felt a connection to the boy in a way similar to how the ABM mentors connect with particular mentees in their program. Throughout that meeting, Malik talked with this boy and played Connect 4 with him, showing a concerted interest in spending time with him while Jason was talking to other scholars.

The ABM mentors represented an array of reasons for becoming mentors. Brian had a Black male art teacher in high school who wanted to help him pursue his interests as a filmmaker. He said “the value in that for me was talking to him about navigating relationships, finance, and all of that as you’re being an artist. And that was valuable to me because he was like a grown man out

doing it.” Brian appreciated getting the attention and support from a Black man who was succeeding in a field that he was interested in and who had wisdom on the challenges of entering art. That has inspired Brian to look out for younger Black students in college who are interested in film because he believes, like his teacher, that he can provide some guidance on taking next steps in that career path.

Trey had an alternative motivation as he actually was “the only guy in my household.” He expressed that there “weren't educated Black men mentoring me throughout my years growing up and I feel, given the position that I'm in, if I can be able to be that mentor, there's no reason that I shouldn't be.” His inspiration to serve mentees is driven by a connection to those boys who may also go through life without a Black male counterpart guiding them. Trey acts as a mentor to stop a trend that he saw in his life: Black boys with no Black men supporting and caring for them. His choice is more of a leap of faith than the others because his biography does not feature a mentor like theirs. Luke, on the other hand, had an experience similar to Jason's in terms of having a strong support network and trying to extend it to others. Since Luke lost his father when he was three, he stated that “there was a lot of Black male mentors who I think got me to positions where I was and I felt like I should be paying it forward.” Again, this differs from the previous instances because he had several Black men come support him after losing his father, giving him different images on what he could be once he reached adulthood. He saw their care for him as part of their responsibility and he believes it is his responsibility to pass on what they offered him.

In sharing their inspirations, the participants also explain what keeps them in the field of mentorship. Obligation, may it be to oneself or to a community, guides their actions and informs their choices to support youth. These mentors represent legacies of Black male service networks as well as outliers in their desire to serve. What binds the ABM mentors to their program and what binds Jason to STRIVE is the hope that their mentees will feel that obligation as well and share it

with them. In addition to obligation, there is a recognition of privilege and social status. The ABM mentors know that their position in an elite institution places them on a pedestal as exemplar students. So, they take that role and try to give more youth access to it, thus expanding social networks and giving social capital. These mentors persist because they know what they are able to offer and feel most equipped to continue offering it so generations can follow that trend.

Table 1 synthesizes the explanations of each theme into shorter descriptions with quotes that represent part or all of that theme’s central idea.

Table 1: Themes from Participant Interviews

Themes	Descriptions	Examples
Mentoring Format	The use of group mentoring versus one-on-one mentoring; the use of activities and discussion to expose mentees to new topics; humor as an inherent part of mentoring spaces and relationships	“While sometimes the kids are not engaged in group discussions , I do think group discussions are valuable because it’s important to see, in my opinion, how kids are interacting with one another. ” - Will of ABM
Identity Formation	Methods of encouraging personal growth and fostering future aspirations; mentors trusting their abilities to support youth development	“I feel like it’s like a big help in my life and it’s teaching me a lot of incredible things. And help[s] me understand who I am more. ” - Riley
Points of Convergence	Mentors and mentees connecting through similar interests; reframing situations to connect to the mentee’s interests; not finding points of agreement; self-selecting for mentees who are more similar to the mentors than not	“Y came to me and said ‘Hey, can you tell me more about that?’ Or ‘I also have an experience like that.’ Or ‘I also have a better relationship with one of my parents.’ And then, that was the entryway point. ” - Luke of ABM
Commitment	Understanding the role of parents, school administrators, and other adults in a mentee’s ability to continue the relationship; barriers of time and limited interactions with mentees	“We had to opportunity to go to a STEM convention and I really really wanted to go. We didn't have the commitment from the parents ” - Jason
Challenging Narratives	Challenging assumptions of what Black men do in society; frustrations with relying on negative stereotypes of Black men to frame discussions; encouraging mentees to think of themselves beyond racial categories	“...the goal is to change the psychology of what Black men, the perception of what Black men can and should be doing. ” - Brian of ABM
Inspiration to Mentor	Personal reasons for choosing to mentor and continuing; how mentees can start taking on a mentor role	“And seeing that one kid, he reminds me a lot about myself. Like how I was when I was his age, except the only difference is he talks more than I was. He's able to do the things that I wanted to do, but never was able to. ” - Malik

DISCUSSION

“It is hard to describe the comfort one feels in sitting with something you trust will always be there, something you can count on to remain familiar when all else seems awry.” – an excerpt of “For the

Hardest Days” by Clint Smith from his poetry collection, *Counting Descent*

As seen in this study, there is great comfort between mentors and mentees when their relationships feel fulfilling, supportive, and effective. However, the perspectives offered also show how difficult it is to maintain this comfort within a mentor relationship due to factors that constantly threaten to alter it. The mentor relationships shared in this study disrupt the ideal mentoring model that many mentoring programs try to emulate. While the reflections included definitive moments of closeness and bonding, they also presented the factors that must be mitigated in order to reach that closeness and allow for personal or social growth. As an addition to mentorship literature, this study introduced new answers to how the process of mentor relationships occur. Furthermore, it has inspired more questions for mentorship researchers to explore.

‘Mentoring format’ and ‘identity formation’ as themes not only exposed the merits of two types of mentor structures, but also presented the thought process for balancing both when trying to promote development. The participants valued one-on-one mentoring for the personal relationships that they started *and* they valued group mentoring for the ability to communicate larger ideas and lessons. The literature may already acknowledge these separate attributes, but the unique community that stems from their combination is valuable to feature in mentoring scholarship. Mentees felt comfortable establishing their desired identities with help from their mentors, then introduced those identities to other mentees who were similarly going through a process of self-reflection. These findings do more than describe the variations on format; they identify an underappreciated need for mentees to have peers who are also being mentored in

order to reflect together on their work of identity formation. Moments of humor and moments of bonding outside of the mentor relationship happen in this way, thus helping the mentee become an agent of his own social capital building. For mentorship research, these themes challenge how much power the mentee has in maintaining the ideal mentor relationship through mentorship structures and peer-peer relationships within a group.

'Identity formation' also revealed how mentors' insecurities of their own skills can limit their ability to reach the ideal goal. If mentorship was compared to other fields where performance is heavily evaluated, it would find mentors like the ABM mentors feeling lost and in disbelief of their ability to be helpful. Mentorship literature presents reverence for mentors as community leaders and intellectuals. However, as the ABM mentors are college students trying to reach those mentioned roles, they present 'imposter syndrome' in their roles as mentors. Therefore, the question emerges if researchers should try to fit their ideal mentor relationship model to young mentors or if there is a different model to achieve when someone is just entering this field of service. If we are to consider mentors' comfort, it seems that a different model is necessary.

'Points of convergence' revealed an issue of self-selection in mentoring that is problematic for the future of this field. If mentors continue to work closely only with those who they share interests with or those who will listen to them, then there is a population of Black boys who are lacking support. This is not to say that the mentors who have admired traits lack mentorship; however, if a system continues to only help those who were likely to do well without it, then that system is reproducing inequality. Such self-selection goes against the history of mentorship in the United States as well as the core values of providing care to all youth. The most troublesome youth were once cared for by community volunteers and dedicated probation officers. Now, it is more likely that they are sent through the juvenile justice system several times before being offered

mentors and community support. Mentors must recognize their role within systems of inequality and support and extend their skills to mentees who they would initially avoid.

‘Commitment’ shifts the ideal mentor relationship model by causing the literal removal of the mentee from the entire situation. This theme was given emphasis not for a discussion on attendance, but for a discussion on who else controls the lives of mentees. It becomes clear that mentors only do as much as the mentees’ guardians or school leaders allow them to do. Such a limitation is understandable, especially when formal mentors tend to not be family members or even close friends with mentees’ families. Therefore, mentor relationships only survive when a mentor, like Jason, is persistent in trying to speak with a mentee’s parent or guardian. Lack of persistence leads to mentees being forgotten altogether, like the boy Trey mentions when discussing this theme. This finding expands upon the literature by fully recognizing that the mentor relationship cannot be isolated and must function under the rule of other actors or systems.

‘Challenging narratives’ and ‘inspiration to mentor’ both provided the most revealing information pertaining to the mentors and their identities. It was clear that the mentors’ perspectives on narratives of race, particularly blackness, deeply impacted the way they wanted their mentees to think through racial identity too. Jason’s mentees were encouraged to focus on personal growth separate from rigid racial assumptions or groupings, while the ABM mentees were advised to work against inequalities that Black men face in many sectors of society. In short, these mentors all have the same interest and inspiration to share their values and start a trend of mentorship based on those values. It is their personal biographies and interactions with the Black identity that causes them to vary so much. These themes provided insight on how mentors may approach discussions of identity as a way to bolster them, manifest new ones, or push against negative ones. No matter a mentor’s desire, he has the power to frame entire relationships with mentees under his personal conceptions of how the world interacts with him and other Black men.

This speaks to how many different identities frame, and thus alter, the ideal model of mentor relationships: by restructuring what the mentors value about providing that relationship in the first place.

In all, this study revealed a specific set of perspectives and occurrences within mentorship. While there was no intent for them to be representative of every single mentor relationship, these accounts frame what possible mentor relationships and interactions look like. Even in having a full image of mentorship at work is a rare addition to a mostly quantitative and outcomes-based pool of scholarship. In order to continue this kind of work, new questions regarding the details of mentor relationships must be asked.

Further Research

A longitudinal, mixed-methods study between pairs of diverse mentors and mentees would produce the richest set of results in regards to how different types of people form relationships. In addition, by featuring both interviews and relevant survey data, such a research study could center mentorship research onto the actors who build the relationships rather than what we hope those relationships produce. Such a study would require formal mentoring pairs and, as much as it is possible, pairs who can stay in touch for as long as possible. It is worth noting that results that show the end of mentor relationships is also rich information to gather through mixed-methods.

Another extension of this work would be studying the mentor relationships of Black women and Black queer folks. As mentioned in the introduction, Black men have been publicly centered in mentorship for the past several years. It is true that many of them need mentorship, but the conversation tends to give attention to the cis-gender, heterosexual Black men as opposed to others within the Black identity. This study could also be a mixed methods approach through field observations and interviews. It would require researchers who make these mentoring groups comfortable with their presence as opposed to intrusive.

A study on the variations of one's ability to mentor based on age has many merits. The insecurities that the ABM mentors could manifest in other college- or high school-aged mentors. Instead of performing research that supplements the work of adult mentors, more can be done to support and encourage those young people that want to serve their younger peers now. Such a project would require finding high school, college, and community mentoring programs, so that mentors can be interviewed on their experience. By giving more attention to a mentor's growth from the time they develop interest in the field, we ensure that cycles of mentorship are fostered and reinforced.

Lastly, self-selection within mentoring is an important topic to study as it permeates throughout society. By studying and evaluating the process of matching in mentoring organizations, researchers can determine how much match choices are made based on ideas of 'success' versus actual need or interest in a mentor. This study could move a step further by interviewing those mentees who were matched *and* those who were not matched at all. Rather than exploit the life course of these two types of people, research on self-selection could help those who were not matched share their frustrations with mentoring organizations that they hope will support them. There is a deep weight to feeling forgotten or abandoned by society, especially after being quickly presented the chance of support. If we are meant to guide mentees towards their interests, then research like this present study and many like it in the future must continue to inform those most willing to mentor, no matter the challenges they face and conflicts in interest they encounter.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

Table 1: Interview Participants

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Description
Riley	12-year-old Black boy; mentee of Jason currently in STRIVE; participates in ABM mentoring program, as well
Malik	18-year-old Black boy; mentee of Jason who used to participate in STRIVE regularly
Jason	Black man; mentor of Riley and Malik; founder of STRIVE; works in child and family services
ABM Focus Group (Kevin, Luke, Brian, Will, Trey)	Five Black male college students (one freshman, three sophomores, one junior) who mentor middle school students in a weekly program run by their student organization for Black men

APPENDIX B: THEME OCCURENCES IN INTERVIEWS

Table 2: Number of Theme Occurrences in Interviews

Themes	Total	Riley	Malik	Jason	ABM Focus Group
Mentoring Format	41	5	14	9	13
Identity Formation	33	5	9	10	9
Points of Convergence	23	2	5	4	12
Commitment	39	9	2	11	17
Challenging Narratives	11	2	2	3	4
Inspiration to Mentor	22	3	3	4	12