

A (LOVING) CRITIQUE OF MENTORING RESEARCH

As you may have read in the literature review section of this resource, research has taught us a lot about how mentoring relationships help young people and about how critical consciousness building and related youth action helps all young people thrive. But it is worth recognizing here that these worlds — traditional mentoring research and critical consciousness/sociopolitical research — have rarely intertwined over the last 30 years of scholarship. In fact, there are some ways in which research on mentoring to-date has avoided a critical lens on the work, supporting what might be considered status-quo-affirming narratives about the origins of, and solutions to, youths' struggles. In doing so, this research has, in part, hindered wider adoption of critical mentoring philosophies that can better support youth of color and facilitate youth-led efforts to address long-standing inequities.

So, how has mentoring research limited, inadvertently or otherwise, the adoption of critical mentoring approaches? There are several interrelated themes for our consideration:

- **By “problematizing” young people** (e.g., conceptualizing youth as drains on society or as young people struggling due to personal shortcomings, not structural oppression).
- **By positioning well-off white adults as saviors** (e.g., an emphasis on what wealthier adult mentors can bestow upon marginalized youth, rather than what those mentors could do to prevent marginalization in the first place).
- **By limiting the types of mentoring programming that gets studied in “gold standard” ways**, which in turn limits funding and future opportunities for scaling work (e.g., only very large, well-resourced programs have the numbers of youth served that give statistical power to rigorous evaluation methods, meaning that only those programs get studied and further promoted, leaving many innovative grassroots efforts out of key funding opportunities).
- **By avoiding examinations of root causes of problems** and offering mentoring as an easy “solution” instead of harder policy or systems-level choices (e.g., examining how mentoring can independently promote upward economic mobility rather than recognizing that mentoring can only make a difference if other structural constraints are removed).
- **By frequently being sponsored by the same oppressive systems** that have created so much need for youth in the first place (e.g., companies supporting mentoring programming and research while not paying living wages to BIPOC employees or supporting BIPOC communities where they are headquartered).

This is not to suggest that mentoring is the only field that has these challenges (e.g., many of these challenges are also present in educational research and efforts to address so-called failing schools). It is also not to suggest that the researchers who have grown our understanding of the power of mentoring over the years have contributed to these challenges purposefully. Far from it, as in our experience, mentoring scholars care deeply about not only their integrity as scientists, but also about America's young people, the ways in which American economic and cultural forces marginalize and harm entire communities, and how we can support young people to not only navigate those challenges, but to fix them.

Naming the issues above is simply an acknowledgment that research on mentoring, like everything else in America, is influenced by the forces and structures that control this society. Those forces are largely driven by power, money, racism (and other isms), and purposefully narrow conceptualizations of what information is meaningful and valid. Research, poorly conceived and applied, can often be a tool of gatekeeping and can reinforce systemic inequities.

The future of mentoring research must break away — as best it can and in *partnership with* youth and communities — from frameworks and power dynamics that constrict and restrain what we know about mentoring and how we know it. Much in the way that we are encouraging practitioners to break away from simple “solutionist” mindsets that only entrench inequitable power structures, the research community can also view its work as being *in support of liberation*, not the needs of those with power. That doesn’t mean research abandons its neutral, objective pursuit of truth; it means that it honors a wider set of voices, utilizes a broader set of methodologies (e.g., participatory research, empowerment evaluation), and inhabits a much different relationship with those who stand to benefit from maintaining the status quo. We hope that future generations of mentoring scholars can avoid the critiques noted above and design research that empowers youth and communities to build a better world rather than attempting to prove that mentoring is just an effective method for helping youth survive a toxic environment.

