A New Lens: Experiences and perceptions of the Black Male Mentor

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

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June 2016

Acknowledgements

My gratitude extends beyond what words can express. Although it is celebrated as an individual accomplishment, it was truly a collective effort from all those around me; it was a beautiful struggle.

To start, all glory is to God; He is free of all wants and worthy of all praise. True success only comes through Him and I submit myself completely to that.

To my family- you all have been a supportive and lovely foundation to give me the space to focus on my own cultivation. My mother, I will always remember growing up with her continuously telling me to "study" and "read" and "not to take any handouts". As a refugee immigrant, she never received a formal education herself, but she understood the dire importance of a formalized education and the opportunities it can bring in America. She is the one responsible for planting the seed of normalizing excellence in all endeavors that I carry out. My brother shouldered a lot of the family burden and would let me know when I was out of alignment, and I deeply appreciative him for that. My sister who has taught me a great deal of patience, for that I am forever grateful. My nephew who was in the forefront of my mind when I was doing this work, I hope he reads this one day and understands.

To my grandpa, grandma, aunts, uncles, cousins-you all play a vital role in my own life and I am blessed beyond belief for that. This family has really provided me with a sense of security that I can trust to fall back on when needed; really allowing to fully invest in myself.

To my friends- I appreciate the space and support you continue to give me to grow into the person I aim to be. The simple reminders that you tell me, that may seem to go unnoticed, go a long way for me.

To my instructors, professors, and advisers- Thank you for helping me refine my thoughts and giving me the skills to express them clearly. By equipping me with the formal techniques it has allowed me to translate neighborhood conversations into academic language.

Dedication

First, I dedicate this to the only person that will always be apart of me that I never got a chance to grow with; Dad. I never understood my deep rooted interest in this topic until I realized the emptiness I felt by not having your physical presence. I am only left with your stories shared with me by those whom you have had a lasting impact on. Your legacy will live on; when we meet I pray we can rejoice over the fact; God willing.

Lastly, I dedicate this to my own formal and non-formal mentors. These individuals have provided a blueprint for me to mold into the human I am today. Also, to those who have allowed me to be their own mentor to model themselves after; that's why I do this work.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Black male mentor as a participant in New Lens Urban Mentoring Society from the mentors' vantage point. Using their shared narratives, stories, insights, and perspectives, the findings speak to the experiences and perceptions of Black male mentors within the mentoring organization. Using a phenomenological approach to analyze the data collected from an evaluation study conducted on the organization allowed for this study to make meaning. The findings of this study provide implications for practice for mentoring organizations, mentor training, insights in understanding the ecological systems that impact the Black male mentor, and ultimately, the future success of mentorship for Black males.

Keywords: mentorship, black males, mentor, mentor organizations, mentor training

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Introduction and Purpose

There is a critical need to cultivate, nurture, and foster the developmental growth of Black males in America. Black males have been consistently viewed as inferior, deviant, and dysfunctional within this Eurocentric paradigm (Dance, 2002). There needs to be a shift in the narrative that has falsely categorized the experiences and perceptions of Black males within this societal context. I am calling for the power be placed in the hands of the Black males themselves to voice their own lived experiences and perceptions as American citizens, by using their own shared narratives to articulate the systems in place that hinder the successful growth of the Black male in America. To alleviate this deficiency for Black male development within the American context there is a need to seek out solutions to better scaffold their own potential; one of those solutions is mentoring (Dance, 2002; Fashola, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Black male mentor as a participant within a mentoring organization. Using a phenomenological approach to analyze the data collected from an evaluation study, the guiding research question is: *What are the experiences and perceptions of Black male mentors in a mentoring organization?* Using their shared stories, narratives, insights, and perspectives, provides an inside lens from the Black male mentors' vantage point as a participant. The findings of this study seek to make meaning of these shared experiences and perceptions to provide implications in practice for mentoring organizations, mentor training, a conceptualized understanding of ecological systems that impact the Black male mentor, and ultimately the future success of mentorship for Black males.

There is no denying the absolute attack on Black males within American society from its very beginnings. The agenda to deconstruct and destroy the Black male presence within communities is infused into the fabric of American history (Kunjufu,1983). Stemming all the ways back to Frederick Douglass (1865) when he wrote about the Black male and the implications of being denied suffrage, Douglass stated:

> Men are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely from the estimate formed of them by others. If nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation…you affirm our incapacity to form an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit…this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves, and to feel that we have no possibilities like other men.

From over 150 years ago, Douglass' words are still felt today. We, as Black men, have allowed dominant American society to place insufficient measures of our own potential as active citizens. With these low expectations set, an undervalued sense of self becomes the norm. Douglass was discussing the destructive dominant discourse that can limit the Black males' possibilities to fully grow into his own potential. We, as scholars, need to provide voice to Black males that have been disenfranchised from the very nation that they have helped to create and establish. It is essential to provide intellectual discourse at institutional levels to share stories of marginalized populations. It is of extreme importance that these populations are provided a platform to speak themselves. This way it doesn't create falsified estimations on human potential that can be difficult to contradict, just like Douglass was referencing.

Transitioning to the Willie Lynch Letters that were written to outline steps to enslave those of African descent, these letters highlighted: the need to pit the old Black

males against the young Black males, breaking Blacks down from their "natural state in nature", an emphasis on the concentrated destruction of the future generations, and ripping away the influence of the Black male within the family structure (Lynch 2009). Lynch proposed this tactic in order to psychologically manipulate those of African decent to be falsely dependent upon Whites as their masters. More importantly, there was an emphasis on cultivating a mind-state of fear, distrust, and envy in the younger generation.

Presently, although the dates on the calendar have changed, the majority culture has not shifted. The contemporary context has the same concepts of the past, one could argue, that have just switched forms. For example, the present police state that has deliberately and unlawfully killed and imprisoned many of those in the Black community. The current brutality that the Black population has faced discriminately is the causation for nationwide movements to uplift these communities.

The presentation of this historical background shows the importance of mentoring for Black males. It provides a way to model behavior to produce positive opportunities for their improvement (Dance, 2002). The rationale for mentoring Black males is expressed in research by showing how effective mentoring programs have produced positive impacts as interventions (Gordon et al., 2009; Fashola 2003; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011). Furthermore, the focus on raising the socio-emotional levels of Black males is important. As males of color, they are constantly reminded about their false inability that they have to succeed causing an effect on their motivation to perform (Sealey-Ruiz & Green, 2011). Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) stated the importance of non-cognitive variables and how they can be predictors of success for Blacks. These non-

cognitive skills can impact these Black males by creating an internalized motivation for their own greater success.

In my own experiences I have had priceless wisdom from mentors that have had a significant impact in the trajectory of my own life. The concept of trajectories can be psychological or social and allows for the creation of pathways over a life span (Elder, 1985). This transfer of knowledge has a great impact on the life and/or career of the individual the mentor is influencing. It is through this transfer of experiential knowledge, that I could not gain otherwise, that has fueled my passion towards this area of research.

The mentors that we choose to model our behavior after lead us down various pathways of opportunities. Whether these opportunities be positive or negative, others have showed us this way. These role models are those that have the most significant direct impact on us. Being placed in a nurturing environment with an abundance of positive role models is an ideal situation for all human development. Although often times that is not the reality, it drastically shifts when we move past various cultural lines. Positive influences can provide a protective barrier for the individual from the interactions between the system, other individuals, and indirect influences to limit his/her future trajectory (Hughes, 1997). There is a lack of positive role models for Black males thus presenting the need for mentorship as a solution (Dance, 2002).

Academic researchers have not paid enough attention to Black male mentors to be gaining insights from their narratives. The main purpose of this study is to learn about Black male mentors' experiences and perceptions based on interviews with them as participants in a mentoring organization. Due to the limited research in this particular

context, this work is primarily meant to contribute to other future mentoring organizations and/or out-of-school programs that seek to understand Black male mentor-based experiences. This can also be used, in a limited degree, to understand the Black male mentor experiences and perceptions in a generalized context.

New Lens Urban Mentoring Society

To understand the Black male mentors' experience, an evaluation was conducted on New Lens Urban Mentoring Society (NLUMS). NLUMS is a multi-generational culturally congruent mentoring organization for Black males in 8th-12th grade. This society, based in the Saint Paul Public School system, is designed to provide young men with culturally congruent Black male mentors to "improve the quality of life" by focusing on the development of socio-emotional and non-cognitive skills. Many of the youth that are involved in this organization have been proven to be active leaders within their schools and communities.

Through their exposure to new experiences in the society, the mentees begin to show positive improvements in areas that include: school attendance, school involvement, overall grade performance, and non-violence efforts. This knowledge has come from my two year of participation in the mentoring organization. These mentees are paired with mentors to help guide them along their own development tract to scaffold the process of growth in multiple areas. The mentors provide them with positive support, multiple perspectives of blackness, a living role model, and also one to model behavior and attributes after.

Mentors are recruited through a variety of networks: local Colleges and Universities, professional and business corporations, referrals, etc. After the recruitment and at the beginning of this study, these mentors participated in a weekend retreat before the start of their role. This retreat is where they received the proper training and guidelines needed to carry out their work. Throughout the year the mentors were supported through: monthly mentor meetings, conference calls with other mentors, and provided with staff support. Through these areas the mentor would be coached to properly solve any issue that he may run into.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

To understand the importance of Black male mentors and the value of their relationship within a greater context, it was necessary for me to find a theory that provided a clear explanation. With this in mind, I settled upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner stated:

> the understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior on the part of one or two persons in the same place; it requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject.

This theory focuses on the development of the individual within relation to the multiple environments that he/she may be in contact with. It then breaks it down into four systems: *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.*

Microsystem is the direction relationships between the individual in his/her immediate setting (family, home, living environment, etc.). *Mesosystem* includes the

interactions the individual has with the immediate settings (i.e. school, peer group, camp, places of worship). The *exosystem* is the connection of the mesosystem with other social structures that affect the persons' immediate settings (mass media, governments, employment, neighborhood). *Macrosystem* is the umbrella patterns of the culture (economic, social, educational, legal, political) creating the manifestations in the other systems (micro, meso, and exo).

Similar uses of the ecological systems theory come in to use when discussing development of marginalized individuals. Kim and Diaz (2013) have used the model in the context of immigrant students in relation to higher education. Strayhorn (2009) uses the same theoretical framework to describe the relational aspects of student outcomes with multiple variables with Black males as the focus. Similar to his thinking, I settled upon this model because of the robust and appropriate applications in my own study. Although he may have used his to explain the relational dynamics within the multiple variables that effect their outcomes as Black male students, mine takes a different approach. I chose to focus on the various ecological systems in place that directly and/or indirectly have an influence on the Black male mentors' development.

With this frame of reference, I use Bronfenbrenner theory to provide insights in how the various systems can impact the Black male mentor (see Figure 1). The *microsystem* is what directly impacts the Black male mentor and includes: family, socioeconomic status, living environment, peers, mentors. The contents of this system are those things that the Black male mentor may have direct and immediate contact with. The *mesosystem* is the connections and interactions the individual has related to that in the

microsystem. For example, these include: relationships between members of the family, interactions with living environment, social interactions with peers. The social interaction with those they are directly connected with can have a major impact on shaping the Black male mentors' individual development. The *exosystem* is the interactions between settings and/or influences, that the individual has no direct contact with, that correlates to his immediate context. Examples of this include: media (tv, news, music, movies), negative stereotypes of black males, perceptions of Black role models. All these create a false perpetuation of how others view their identity which can affect the Black male mentors' own individual development. Leading into the *macrosystem* which in this case is the interactions between the Black male mentor and the surrounding systems in place.

These systems in place have lead to the destruction of the Black male in many ways (i.e. incarceration, unemployment, miseducation) (Woodson, 2009). From prisons, corporations, law, politics, credit, education; all these have restricted the Black male. These ecological systems all feed into the individual to get at the crux of what I am discussing; the Black male mentor. The Black male mentor is surrounded by all these ecological systems that affect his individual development. By looking at the phenomenology of Black male mentors we can look at ways of understanding their importance within the greater societal structure. That structure provides a deficit model of development that reinforces a negative outcome for Black males within the American society.
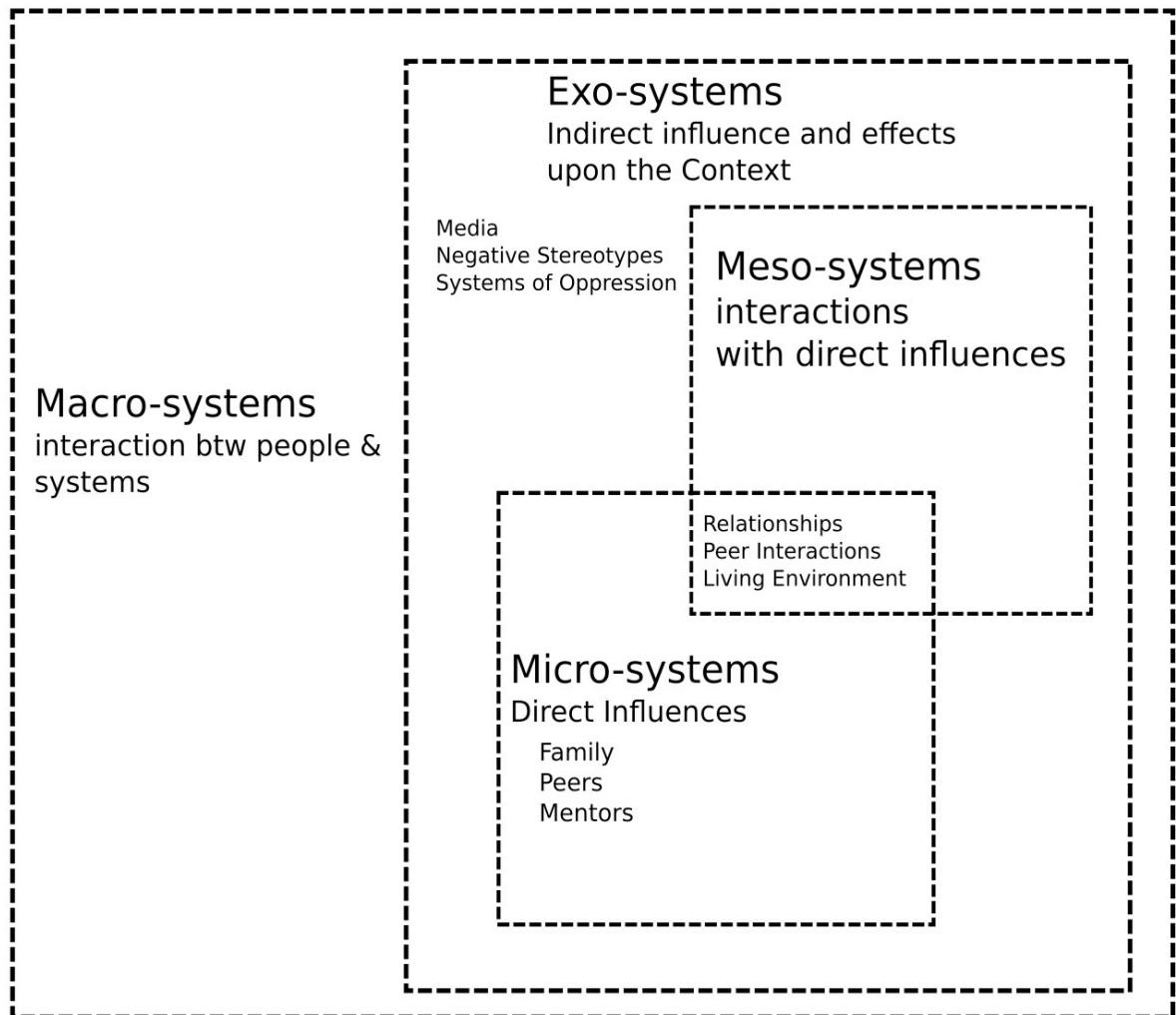
Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology model in interacting boxes

Mentor Terminology

A mentor is a non-parental adult who provides guidance to one whom is less experienced learn the ways of the world and gives support in multiple facets (Wickman & Sjodin, 1997; DuBois & Karcher, 2014). This mentee, or protégé, is given guidance and knowledge from the mentor through the development of the relationship. The concept of mentor has a long history and is included in the well-known fable in Greek mythology in

the story of *The Odyssey*. Throughout the story Mentor was a friend of Odysseus that provided father-like teaching to his son. With the word mentor emerging from this story, it has stayed with us ever since (Wickman & Sjodin, 1997; Zachary, 2000). Using its etymology provides a better grasp of understating the root of the word and where it was derived from. The explaining the role of the Mentor to Odysseus and pairing it with its definition in the literature provides a better understanding of what a mentor is. Though we can come to a definition on what a mentor is or what he/she does, there is little consistency on how the role should be performed (Griffin, Eury, & Gaffney, 2015).

Research studies predominantly focus on mentees, though there are a few studies that focus on and explore the mentors in a mentoring organization (Weiler, Zarich, Haddock, Krafchick & Zimmerman, 2014). Studies have often shown the perspective of the mentee and their overall benefits from their participation in mentoring. Furthermore, these studies have been done from a Eurocentric perspective. I aim to provide the lens from the Black male mentor's experiences and perceptions as a participant in a culturally congruent mentoring organization. Three themes emerge from my exploration of the literature: 1) the benefits that are associated with the role of a mentor 2) the mentors' experiences and perceptions and 3) the mentors' relationship with the youth.

Mentor Benefits

The mentor and mentee gain from their interactions with each other through their mutual relationship (Trepanler-Street, 2007). Once the relationship is established the mentor indirectly becomes a learning recipient throughout the whole process (Wickman & Sjodin, 1997). This learning process enables the benefits of the mentors to occur. The

mentor benefits include: being able to carry one's own legacy, keeping the mind sharpened, forcing the mentor to set an example enhancing the mentors' own performance, creating a greater sense of value for the mentor to others, encouraging a sense of creativity, and allowing the mentor to give and get back from relationship (Wickman & Sjodin, 1997).

The mentor role allows for the individual to develop skills and abilities that they could not otherwise. These skills include: leadership development, communication enhancement, effective teamwork abilities, and developing an understanding and respect for others (Trepanler-Street, 2007). These benefits and skills listed can be carried into other aspects and elements of the mentors' life. Not only does it give them these life-long assets, it also pushes the mentor to become more engaged in the communities they interact with. With this empowerment they take on leadership roles to provide solutions to complex issues the community may be facing (Trepanler-Street, 2007).

Mentors' Experiences & Perceptions

Experiences and perceptions of the mentee have often been the focus of academic literature; leaving the mentors actuality discounted. Mentors often describe their experiences as rewarding, enjoyable, and positive (Weiler et al., 2014). From these experiences the mentors expressed: having a boost in confidence with public speaking skills, increase in leadership qualities, better teamwork abilities, and increased involvement in communities (McIntosh, Gidman & Smith, 2013). In order for these positive experiences to occur the mentors, as participants in the organization, need some supplemental assistance. The features that are supplemental to the mentors' experiences

include: a supportive relationship from the staff and others around, proper training and supervision to carry out role, rules and activities to create boundaries in establishing a structure for the mentor (Weiler et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2013). By keeping these characteristics of features in mind it can provide the mentors with a rewarding experience. These experiences are built upon the foundation of mentoring. That foundation is the relationship establishment.

Mentor Relationship

The research studies have shown that effective mentors are those that develop emotionally connected and caring relationships with the youth they are involved with over a period of time (Rhodes et al., 2006; DuBois & Karcher, 2014; Freedman, 1993; Baker & Griffin, 2010). It is not enough to simply develop a meaningless connection with the youth, but a caring one must be nurtured. By the creation of this relationship it can cultivate the mentee in multiple ways. The mentor assists the mentee to: prepare for adulthood, enhance his/her emotional well-being, and aids the development for a positive sense of identity (Freedman, 1993; Rhodes et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2002). In the context of Black male students, literature has shown well established mentor-relationships are closely connected to the students' success (Jackson et al., 2014). I am suggesting that the mentees can develop this same level of success from a connected relationship with the Black male mentor.

Relationships are not easy to develop. Relationship development is especially difficult when the initial perception of it only one-dimensional. Close relationships and social interactions have a big impact on own our development. Scientific understandings

of how relationships can mold our own expectations, desires, and goals are beginning to be conceptually understood (Rath & Harter, 2010). Growing an understanding of how relationships can have mutual impact at both ends gives rationale for its importance in mentoring. For the mentoring to have a major impact emphasis should be placed on the relationship development. The mentor-mentee relationship is one that needs to have a mutual amount of respect, trust, and brotherhood between the two parties; it's a reciprocated process (Rhodes et al., 2006; Pryce et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2014).

An individually cannot properly carry out the role of a mentor without first establishing the relational dynamics. Having qualities of relationship establishment is important for the mentoring to take place. These qualities include: developing an ethos of care, having a sense of empathy, creating authenticity, and sensitivity to help cultivate a meaningful relationship with the mentee (Rhodes et al., 2006; Freedman, 1993; Jackson et al., 2014). Teachers that can engage in culturally responsive relationships with their students provide them with a supportive environment (Jackson et al., 2014). Thus a mentor, defined as one who provides guidance to one less experienced learn the ways of knowing, needs to engage in culturally responsive ways when building a relationship with the mentee to effectively translate knowledge.

Cultural responsiveness is defined as "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effect for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming" (Gay, 2000). This definition of cultural responsiveness is important to understand when developing a

mentor-mentee relationship in diverse populations. In the case of the Black male mentor, it is important that learning is closely tied to their own lived experiences. When the Black male mentor is effectively cultivating a sense of brotherhood with their mentee that is culturally responsive, they can properly transfer ways of knowing to become an effective mentor.

Communalism

The root of all Blacks extend to Africa (some even argue that it is the bedrock for all human civilization). As Black males in America, it's a factual understanding that they have been ripped from their root of ancestry. Of the various philosophical perspectives and ideals that are rooted in African thought, there is one concept that has a common theme across them all; that concept is communalism. Before one can understand communalism, it is essential to understand what the community represents. Community, in African thought, is in relation to the traditions, values, spirituality that is connected to those living, the dead ancestors, and future generations (Boykin et al., 1997). Furthermore, "In African thought, the community that 'we' refers to includes traditions, values, and 'spiritual selves' that are metaphysically connected to living people, dead, ancestors, and posterity" (Ikuenobe, 2006). With this definition of community, it sets the stage to better understand the notion of communalism. Thus, communalism is the interconnectedness of all those that are part of the community creating an interdependence amongst each other (Boykin et al., 1997; Ikuenobe, 2006*).* Ikuenobe stated that:

> For the communalist, people see and identify themselves in terms of how their
> community trains, shapes and morally educates them to acquire personhood, and

how their moral thinking is shaped by the context of the community with respect to their actions and behavior (p. 56)

As descendants of Africa, Black males can use this concept to help better connect themselves to their own collective cultural memory. Meaning that the revival of these traditional African philosophies creates an alignment of understanding between those who share Black culture. Black males should establish a sense of communalism which supersedes the individualistic nature and nurtures the collective (Boykin et al., 1997; Ikuenobe, 2006). Theses communalist ideals are directly correlated to those of a mentor. As stated before, a mentor is one who gives support and shares wisdom. That support and wisdom, for the Black male, needs to comes with the conceptual understanding of communalism thought. By providing Black males with a revived outlook on the community they represent, and not the community that is perpetuated from the various ecological systems, presents them with a way of practice that is culturally congruent for positive outcomes.

Formal Mentoring

Mentoring can provide a great deal of support to Black males in a variety of contexts. Harper (2012) conducted a study that focused on 219 black men and their pre-college experiences that enabled them to further succeed. To give further background, he stated:

> [This] national study included 219 Black male undergraduates who had earned cumulative grade point averages above 3.0, established lengthy records of leadership and active engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, participated in enriching educational experiences (for example, study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs),

and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their college achievements (p. 7).

This study targeted Black male college students that were multi-dimensional and motivated to succeed academically. These Black male students came from low socio-economic backgrounds and were often times the first in their families to go to college. Throughout these interviews they noted several things that helped them transition into college and attributed to their success; mentoring played a major role. This article stated that:

> None said anything about their postsecondary institutions' structured mentoring programs as they named people, experiences, and resources that aided their college success. Put differently, no participant attributed even a fraction of his college achievement to a program that systematically matched him with faculty, staff, or peers with whom he was to routinely meet… [instead] working closely on educationally purposeful tasks outside the classroom afforded the educators and achievers substantive opportunities to learn about each other, which added value to the students' achievement trajectories in myriad ways (p. 16).

Although these Black male students were in a college setting, the relationships with mentors that were cultivated outside of a formalized structured provided a greater impact on their achievement. None of the Black male participants recognized a structured mentoring organization, within the institution, that was an aid to their success. Thus, leading to understand the effectiveness of mentoring organizations in the out-of-school context and how it can have profound impact on Black male success.

Also, this provides understanding that Black males within a systematized mentoring structure does not provide positive impact on their academic achievement. The mentoring structure must have roots of cultural connectedness to the population it aims to serve. In this context the establishment of the mentoring relationship was not culturally

cultivated through the strengths of these students to valid and affirm them. A mentoring

organization, aiming to serve the Black male population, must show the responsiveness to

the Black culture and connect to common notions of communalist thought.

Methodology

Evaluation Process

      To align with the model New Lens Urban Mentoring Society (NLUMS) has in

place, the evaluation process was culturally congruent in all aspects. It was led by four

Black males who were graduate students at the University of Minnesota. The evaluation

was conducted by using a developmental evaluation framework. Developmental

evaluation involves observing the program and where its going to make judgments for

future programming and re-designing; never expecting to come to a steady state of

programming due to the constant change of: participants of organization, conditions of

organization, and learnings that provide contextual change to the evaluation (Patton,

1994). Furthermore, development evaluation is meant to support innovative

developments to form adaptive restraints emergent in realities of various environments

(Patton, 2011). The process is developmental – iterative and changing over time as the

context and program becomes more clear to the evaluators conducting the practice.

      At one of the initial meetings, we as evaluators decided to intentionally name

ourselves the "New Lens Scribes." In African, Near Eastern, and ancient Mediterrrean,

there was a class of knowledge base workers called Scribes (Radner & Robson, 2011).

These "scribes" would transcribe the information on clay tablets or paper to preserve the

knowledge and information being created. Without this position there would be little

known recorded information about these ancient civilizations. The Scribes were responsible for collecting the knowledge cultivated within these cultures and disseminating the information. For this reason, we as evaluators of the NLUMS culture chose to position ourselves as "Scribes" within the Society. We wanted a unique name that represented the developmental approach that we were taking with the evaluative process. We did not want to be seen as intruders within the society, rather seen as documenters and observers, referencing the ancient African tradition. The word Scribe emphasized our positionality within the societal culture, as opposed to being seen as an intruder coming in to study the collective. Moreover, by intentionally selecting this term of reference we were reviving a cultural tradition that was congruent to the population we were evaluating.

We chose to collect qualitative data from the mentors and the mentees themselves. The evaluation includes these data collection methods:

- Interviews: Interviews with mentors occurred regularly throughout the year. These interviews provided insight into the mentor's measurements of specific non-cognitive skills and well as their experiences and perceptions as participants in the organization.

- Ethnographic observations: By using an emic perspective, the mentors were observed at retreats, programmatic activities, and mentor outings.

Interviewees

The participants of this study include 5 mentors that were part of NLUMS for the 2014-2015 calendar year. All mentors in NLUMS are congruent with the culture it represents; thus the 5 interviewed self-identified as Black or African-American males. Ages of the mentors interviewed range from 19 to 38. From the mentors included in this

study, they had various occupations that include: Public School Worker, Full-time undergraduate students, Network Engineer, and an IT Specialist. The names that will be used to identify them will be: DeShawn, Jamal, Darius, Jalen, and Terrell.

Procedure

These interviews were conducted in public locations with a tape recorder to collect all information that was discussed. All interviews were then transcribed by an outside source not connected to the evaluation project. The interviews that this research will focus on are the second part of the interview series. This second part of the interview series focused on the mentors experiences and perceptions about topics that include: the relationship with their mentee(s) and being a mentor in NLUMS.

The interviews questions included: Why do you think mentoring young Black men is important? What experiences have you had working with groups of young Black men? What has it been like for you to be a mentor? How is the mentoring process going for you? What are you learning about yourself? What does it take to be a good mentor? Each of the interviews conducted ranged from about 40-60 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

With the focus on the mentor's expression of their own experiences and perceptions, the most logical protocol would be using a phenomenological data analysis approach. Although there are various approaches even within this protocol, what they all have in common is the focus of exploring how human beings make sense of their experiences by bring them into reality individually and as a shared meaning (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Van Manen (1990) clarified when stated:

Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, 'What is this or that kind of experiences like?' It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it. So phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effect theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world (p. 9).

This definition gives very clear understanding in the reasoning of phenomenology and what the aims of its use are. This study seeks to get a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Black male mentors. By using their insights, I hope to bring their self-expressed experiences forward in order for the reader to have more direct contact with them for greater comprehension of their lived reality.

For my data analysis I used the modified Van Manen method of data analysis protocol. This protocol entails 1) listing and grouping the experiences from the transcripts, 2) reducing those that are necessary for understanding their experiences and eliminate expressions that don't meet those requirements, 3) clustering them into themes that are shared, and lastly 4) seek for validation expressed throughout the data (Moustakas, 1994).

Findings

Analysis of the five interviews revealed four themes. These included: Combative Influence of Black Identities, Relationship Connectivity, Mentor Benefits, and Mentor Modeling. These themes all stem from the shared stories that these 5 Black male mentors provided in their interview. Furthermore, each of these themes support and intersect with each other to create a holistic picture of the shared experiences, stories, narratives, and thoughts of these Black male mentors as participants in this study. These findings seek to

provide understanding of the phenomenology in experiences and perceptions that Black

male mentors not only endure personally, but also what they experience as participants

within a mentoring organization.

Combative Influence of Black Identities

For Black males, there is constant set of false perceptions that are limiting in the

formation of their identity. The Black identity, as defined by dominant discourse (i.e.

media, educational systems, correctional facilities), is a widely used narrative that is spun

for and by others not within the collective to better categorically define and

compartmentalize the Black identity for better understanding. Specifically, the Black

male identity is created, shaped, and controlled by the dominant discourse in the

American society context. The concept of the Black male identity is rarely told from the

Black male himself. The Black male mentors interviewed in this study shared extremely

rich insights that were collectively shared to form this theme.

This theme is the umbrella of all the findings in this study. It captures the essence of what

these Black male mentors expressed when they were asked why they believe it is

important to mentor young Black males. To give greater context in the decision of using

the title "Combating Influence of Black Identities" for the theme, it first must be

understood that I chose the wording with extreme intentionality. In my first analysis I

named it simply, "Positive Role Models", but then realized the mentors were discussing

something so much more profound. It was the deliberate expression of the mentors

acknowledging the way they use mentoring as a vehicle to fight against the false notions

of Black male identity. These findings are specific to Black males simply because this is the population this study was focused on and tailored towards. These findings could potentially be translated to other societal contexts where there is a minority population within a dominant majority culture, although for this study this was not the particular frame of focus.

This theme was categorized from the mentors' responses to a variety of questions. Those responses shaped the criteria in this theme:

- Providing an influence for the better by showing positive black male images

- Shining light on a positive perspective not shown by dominant discourse

- Showing the multiple perspectives possible for Black male identities.

The participants interviewed commented a great deal on the ways in which negative images, perceptions, and stereotypes of Black males impact themselves. These negative perceptions of the Black male identity caused the mentors to feel a need to challenge these negative images with a positive light for the young black males they were mentoring.

Jalen discussed the negative images of Black males pushed by the media and the importance of showing a positive one. This positive influence provides a combative one against the images that are heavily emphasized. When asked why he believes mentoring young black males is important, he states:

I feel like it adds a good counter balance, because I feel that so much of the media and tv is constantly pushing these negative images...I feel like there also needs to be that positive light. And I feel like they don't see that as much…This is how other black men live, we have very normal jobs, some are engaged, some are already married, like, we live a very normal typical 9 to 5 lifestyle…So I feel like mentoring kind of helps to ground them in reality, show them what's it's really like

Jalen captured the essence of the negative stereotypes projected on Black males and how mentoring can help to ground them against those images. He expresses how mentoring provides a combative balance to the negatively constructed Black male identity. Furthermore, providing insight on how the Black male identity can be one that embodies a typical lifestyle.

Jamal, another mentor of the organization, continues the discussion of challenging negative stereotypes by stating:

there's only like two different roles for Blacks, you know, you can meet with those who tend to be thugs and those who are trying to be athletes…Where you kind of look at the White culture, I think there was like the crafty group, the nerdy group, there's the skater group, the gothic group all sorts of different varieties and you can kind of, you have more options…So you're going to be challenged about who you are, what you're doing, are you trying to be White because you're trying to get your education. And I think that's one of the biggest downfalls

Here he talks about the various choices of identity that are available for those that are white, but for those that identity as Black only have a choice between two. Meaning that there is a tendency to pigeon hole the Black male identity to create a false dichotomy (thug or athlete) versus the counterpart of those identified as white have multiple identities to choose and further create. Those challenges are what this mentor addresses to be on the greatest pitfall for a Black male to obtain his true identity.

DeShawn adds to the dialogue by discussing the need to mentor Black youth by pointing out all the negatives in society. He states:

> *because there is so much negativity out there, that they need to have something positive…they need some good mentors. They need good mentors that are doing positive things, so I think it's huge because you know, some of them, like I said the mentors in their lives are negative and some of them just don't have any mentors so they're just consistently searching and while they're searching their getting themselves in to trouble and they're getting records and all that stuff and then that pipeline is going to land them in prison and so umm, I think it's huge, it's so needed*

DeShawn pinpoints the needs for Black youth to have positive mentors in their life. He touches upon the prison pipeline and how positive role modeling can be a solution to the issues young Black men are facing.

Terrell pushes the discussion further by adding the notion of seeing is believing to the conversation. Meaning that the perceptions of the Black male identity are constructed by Black males themselves. Furthermore, he states:

> *there isn't too many positive Black role models for young men today, you know? I feel that it's very important to show them my example like saying like that this is a place that I can inspire to be, like I can be like this man, you know what I mean? Because it's all about what you see and what you perceive in life as far as working, I see myself in those shows, so if they only see wearing their pants half way down, you know, their ass on the street corner doing whatever, if they only see that as the Black men in my community and that's what they grow up to me. You know, that's going to be me but I want to give just a different outlook like it doesn't have to be like that, things can be positive.*

Terrell's insights capture the need for a way to combat the negatives by providing living examples of positive Black role models. He brings forth a powerful argument by stating how a Black male perceives himself is shaped by how others like them behaves. This perception creates an inspiration for the mentor to provide that positive light. So from the perception of a young Black male, he sees himself in those negative stereotypes displayed and further internalizes it as the identity he needs to obtain. Thus, by further providing a positive and an alternative identity of self the young Black male can see themselves in their mentors and grow a combative identity against that dominant negative imagery and strive to retain that positivity into their own lives.

In addition, when Jamal was asked what it is like for him to be New Lens Mentor, he states:

> *ahh man, it's really been, like I said, the piece that I just mentioned about kind of just building this network of Black men. We're going outside of the traditional or typical stereo typical roles umm here in St. Paul, Minnesota…It's like the opposite, like when you see the movie Selma, when you feel angry and upset like you're kind of going on the other end of the spectrum of positivity and joy and just knowing that you know we are more blessed then the world thinks we are or that we think we are. You know, more than that and then just—it just makes you feel like we're moving a positive direction*

Jamal shared his excitement in creating positive ways to push against the dominant narratives to create multiple perspectives of Black identities.

When discussing what the mentees should get out of the program, Jalen states:

> *the positive influence, like, a whole other like spectrum that especially having like the multi-generational… I didn't see like positive role models in different generations like that, like, I feel like that definitely helps seeing that it's not just there select few groups of like Black men, it's like no, there are older Black men that are like this*

In his reference to multi-generational support, Jalen provides insight to the importance of elder Black males and the vital role they play for young Black males constructing their identity. He further discusses how the element of a positive influence is what the mentees

should be getting out of the program to combat the negative identities they may be exposed to.

DeShawn continues the conversation by adding

> *I think positivity because mentees that get that, there are people out there that care, you know, there are people out there that will help you, you just got to reach out. And having an mentor is huge because we're giving them that extra person in their lives that they can reach out to and say something that's going on or something you can't speak to your parents—you feel like you can't talk to your parents, you got the extra person and in some cases they might feel like, man, I can't –I don't feel safe enough to talk to my mom or dad about this but I can call my mentor, you know, and say hey, you know, I'm struggling with this at school or somebody's bothering me at school, you know, ahh I think that's huge. One extra person is always going to help out children when they're going through grade school and high school*

DeShawn touches upon the importance of discussing issues with another Black male that is not seen in the light of a parental figure. The connection of the positivity along with mentorship can help combat that negativity that is out there for Black youth. Having a mentor to discuss issues with creates an outlet for the mentee and provides the Black male mentor the opportunity to direct him towards a positive light.

Jamal, when asked why he believes mentoring young Black males are important,

discussed the plight of the African-American in a multitude of aspects. He says:

> *just knowing our condition, the plight of [Black male] umm in the nation…we are*
>
> *lagging behind. And so it's just like when we go and see the movie Selma and you*
>
> *see Black people struggling you start to feel it, like, you know, in your spirit, in*
>
> *your bones, it just really makes you feel sick, emotional about it. And so this is my*
>
> *way of combating umm, combating those conditions and trying to umm trying to*
>
> *get us out of that state of mind and that actually that physical state, you know, and*
>
> *so something has to be done.*

Jamal's statement provides insight in understanding the condition of Black males in

America. A bold and emotive response by Jamal shows his understanding of the plight of

the Black male in the American societal context. He states how it makes him feel

emotionally distraught, sick, and feeling it down to his core; propelling him to push

against these perceptions and combat them head on. This critical finding about the black

condition shows how it can be felt beyond the physical outer and inner layers and all the

way down to the spirit.

Terrell then shifts and states how positive relationship building is what is most important

to the youth in the program, he states:

> *most important thing? Umm, I believe building positive relationship with other*
>
> *Black men. I think that's the biggest things right there and you know saying we*
>
> *work together, we don't down each other umm we encourage each other to do*

better, you know, it's like I mean it sounds small and it sounds like it should

already be known and done but in some ways it's not. And I feel like it may be

beneficial to get that in your head now and get that part of your regiment in life,

you know, and they can just move forward with that I feel like it's going to be

great, man

His emphasis on building positive relationships with other Black men provides a dynamic

for encouragement to be a better person. Building this positive relationship with Black

men can produce a collective strength to further push against negative stereotypes.

This theme focused on how positive images of the Black male can challenge the negative

stereotypes, providing a sense of perception as an inspiration to grow into a positive

Black male identity, and the plight of the conditions of Blacks in America. From the

culmination of these topics gives added depth to the nature of the combative influence of

Black identities as the role of a Black male mentor.

Relationship Connectivity

Truly effective mentorship is one that is developed from an establishment of a connected

relationship. This theme of Relationship Connectivity was expressed by mentors in the

following ways:

- The challenges in establishing the relationship with the mentee
- Finding new ways in learning to develop the relationship with the mentee
- Sense of community

The patterns in the shared experiences captured provided way to group them together

under the theme of Relationship Connectivity.

Jalen discusses his own struggle in establishing the relationship with his mentee by stating:

> *Trying to more so connect with them on their level. Some of the mentors do a real good job of that, with like, it seems like effortless, and I try and mimic that, but obviously you can't because it's organic, but trying to, I don't know, it was really awkward when you first get your mentee, it's like, I don't know what to talk to you about, like you're like 13 and I try to think about, what was I thinking about when I was 13. So just really struggles trying to connect with him, and now more so I have, because I've had him for a while now, so it's easier to talk with him and connect with him… that's what I feel is the biggest struggle, trying to realize how to relate to them sometimes*

From this statement we can see how he really points out a dynamic struggle of building the relationship with a mentee. Jalen mentions the mentees age and the difficulty he had in establishing rapport with his mentee. This insight provides understanding that when mentoring young teenage males, the mentor-mentee relationship takes time to fully develop. Mentors should take into consideration that these teenage males are at a different stage of development and must find ways to relate to the mentee.

Jamal goes on to discuss the process to grow a relationship and also the similarities that he and his mentee share:

all relationships take time and you can't really force them…when you're

consistently there and just consistently taking your time then ahh you will see the

growth and the bond will become stronger… you have to be able to understand

the patterns of an individual to understand their personality. I don't know him,

not yet… what I do know-about his values, his goals, his beliefs, like so they're

really aligned with mine so I think that's really the starting base, because we're

really kind of on the same page then you can work, it's easier to work with that…

a similarity would be raised in a single parent home with the mother being pretty

much the soul provider… we're both African American, both into sports, he plays

football, that's his whole thing, he's not into basketball. I played both football and

basketball.

His understanding of how relationships take time, having to continuously show up, and learning the patterns of the individual, show his formula to building an effective relationship with his mentee. The most important factor that he discusses is building upon congruent commonalities that they share to be used as a strong foundational piece to better establish the mentor-mentee relationship. From this starting block the connection can grow and foster organically without forcing it.

DeShawn provides insight on how he has been connecting and building relationships with youth in the program. He states:

we did archery, I've never done archery before so, we went to do archery and

they did archery for the first time, I did archery we did connect. I've never done

this before either and everybody was like, I never done this before either, ok let's

do it together and then we'll talk about how, what it was like afterwards so… it

was huge because we were able to connect and communicate at home with what

we're doing… I feel like a big brother

DeShawn pulls from his experience with archery, one of NLUMS activities, and

discusses how they were able to connect and learn together from this experience. The

mentor and mentee were able to build the relationship from the common goal of wanting

to understanding how to complete the task of archery. Since both the mentor and mentee

are novices at archery, they were collectively learning together. Furthermore, extracting

from this statement provides a window to show the impact in how making mistakes

together can have on relationship building. This impact led the mentor and mentee to

develop a connection with open lines of communication to drive the mission of

mentorship.

Jalen also discusses the growth of the relationship with his mentee since the program's

inception. He states:

It's not that awkwardness when we first see each other, like that wall to break

down, it's kinda just like, oh, like what's up… But overall as me and his

relationship builds, I think it's pretty good… I remember one time I just asked him

about like a class, I think it was a science class he was in last year, and instead of

saying, oh it's going good, like he elaborated…and he started elaborating into

this, and now he's like warming up and he's comfortable, and he's not just using

one word answers. So I feel like that moment, I was like, oh he's getting used to me, like he's opening up. So I'd probably say that was the moment where I realized we kind of clicked.

Jalen elaborates on several points connected to relational growth that are worth addressing. By developing a more consistent relationship with his mentee allowed the mentor to establish better rapport with him. This rapport established the mentees comfortablility in opening up and trusting the mentor in the relationship. This also shows the importance, as a mentor, to ask questions that are in particular interest to the mentee. That can provide the mentee with an understanding that the mentor cares to hear about what the mentee is interested in; thus further bridging a connection and growing the relationship.

Terrell chose to talk about his growing appreciation of the role of parental support. Furthermore, he goes to discuss how the open lines of communication with the parent to mentor help the relational connection with the mentee. He states:

I love that parents support all the way…you know it's like I trust you. Like, I trust you and I know nothing's going to happen with my son with you and I love that they have that trust in me and I'm glad that we can build on that…with the parents umm I do like check ins on them every week and see how their doing as far as in school or in the house or anything like that and they umm just plant a little seed in me, you know, give me a little something that they're going through…us as mentors can actually help the parents as far as even just talking to

the kids, understanding the kids giving them that extra ear or outlet saying, you

know, as an adult…so they let me know certain things like that as far as what's

happening in school and you know their relationships at home and so sometimes

it might be something totally different than what the parents think, you know?

Something completely different and that's just how they're acting out, so we just

talk about it and that's good

Capturing how the trusting relationship and open lines of communication between the

mentor and parent provided ways for the parent to become involved in the mentoring

process. With the parental involvement it provided a way for the mentor to grow and

further develop the relationship with the mentee and the parent as well.

DeShawn provides a window into the process of building relationships with kids of

varying ages. He states that:

relationships with them are a little bit different with [mentees in organization]

then with the little kids…Older kids, you got to be a little more creative. I'm

learning to pull out my old bag of tricks from when I was working in the high

school in how to build relationships with the older kids. Because I think that's the

first big step in building relationships and that's the first step that really, even at

the younger level, that's building the relationship. Like the schools are missing

that as well, these kids will learn from people that they have a relationship with.

You don't want to work at building a relationship with a child as a teacher, then

you're going to struggle teaching that child because your relationship is strained

DeShawn shows the differences of establishing relationship with the various age groups of kids and how to go about it. The most important piece he addresses is the vital part of building a relationship and how that is a foundational piece when working with youth. Furthermore, he discusses in order to be an effective educator a healthy relationship must be developed. This provides a powerful dynamic to address how it can be the schools are failing Black youth, and not necessarily Black youth that are failing the schools.

Continuing in his interview, Terrell touched upon the sense of community felt within the whole mentoring organization. He states:

> *I just love it, I have a great relationship with all the mentors, I have a great relationship with all the kids, man, it's not just my mentees but all of us, so it's more like we're a network, we're a group, we're a community, you know… we're all in this together, I love that, you know. I can see it affecting the mentees so much…they even look out for each other so much more now…they look at each other like brothers and they all look out for each other. And I've seen that when they didn't know I was looking…You know things like that, man, and that's just beautiful, and that's beautiful man, it's like that connection that you see they have right now I can guarantee that's going to last for decades, you know what I mean?*

His statement takes the importance of creating meaningful relationships to greater levels. As the relationships amongst the mentor and mentee grow there is an enhanced trust in the organization as a whole. These young men now feel that they have a village of

support from the community that is cultivated. Terrell expresses his deep sense of

connectivity with the mentors and mentees of the mentoring organization by referring to

them as brothers. Brothers that are all aiming towards a common goal of positive

progression and intentionally choosing to get there collectively.

This theme has focused on the process of developing relationships with mentee and

highlights: the honest struggle of developing a relationship with the mentee, the strategies

mentors employed to develop the relationship, and how meaningful relationships lead to

a sense of community for the participants in the mentoring organization.

Mentor Benefits

As stated previously, once the relationship is established the mentor becomes as much a

recipient of learning as the mentee. When mentors spoke of benefits derived from this

role, they focused on what they had learned and gained in the process. These gains fell

into the following categories:

- Being in a community that challenges negative and internalized stereotypes of self
  (both with mentors and mentees)

- Learning from lived experienced and outside of the classroom

- Cultivating skills from mentorship

Jalen elaborates on the insight gained from his own challenges about how he himself

internalized the stereotypes of young Black men. He goes on to state:

it helps me dispel some of the notions I had about young black men, cause even being black myself I have prejudices, like mentally, when I see young black kids hanging out in a group, pants [sagging]… I say all them thugs, like, I stereotype them and label them, and so being around those kids, some of the kids in the program do sag, or they do give off that thug appeal, but when you actually talk to them and like meet them, then you're just like, oh, they're just a normal kid, they're not here gang-banging, that's just how they're choosing to dress. So it kind of teaches me to like, check myself, to like, wow I actually have my own prejudices against my own people, against all young black men, and it allows me to check that and to really actually get to know that kid before I have that bias

By engaging as a mentor to young Black men he had gained more understanding of his own stereotypes he carried toward his own people. It is a constant challenge for a Black male; to not only combat the negative influences, but also being careful to not internalize them. The mentoring experience provided him a mirror to view his own internalization of those negative stereotypes. Jalen touches upon his benefit as a way of a combating his own cultural biases and see others individually for who they are.

Other mentors shared virtues they have obtained from interacting with other Black male mentors, for example Jamal states:

it was nice to have that teaching moment because no person is perfect and we're always growing umm so ahh ya, so making sure I'm fulfilling my obligations and try to not take on too much umm, I'm still learning now because I'm still keep

doing a little bit more than what I think I said that I'm capable of… just

experiencing other men, African American men who are different than what we

typically encounter, the roles that we're supposed to be in, or that we see them in,

in typical bases. Umm, to see these other Black professionals, to show them, you

know it's making me more secure, I think, umm it makes me realize I can do

more

As Jamal began to surround himself with other Black male mentors it gave him a sense of

confidence in his own identity. He is expressing how he is not limited because of the

varying representations of the Black male professionals around him giving him multiple

perspectives of being. This is a benefit he obtained from engaging with the mentoring

organization as a mentor.

DeShawn, a 20-year public school worker, learned how mentoring has a far greater

impact on the kids than what the public school provides. He states that:

mentoring is better than working in the schools. Because you get to bond with

them on a more personal level and it's not like a sit down and do your work, you

know, so you're not like, get out of there, stop! Walk! Don't run! Keep your hands

to yourself. It's more like, hey come on over let's do this archery together and you

kind of joking, you're laughing, you're talking, and you can talk about other stuff

that's not like, sit down, raise your hand, you know, that's what I like. That's what

I really like, I learn that you know to really reach the child like I want to it has to

be through a mentoring vehicle, you know, I love the district, I've been in the

district almost twenty years but you know to really do what I want to do in the

community with [kids] and you know, breaking this cradle to the prison pipeline it

has to be [done by] mentoring and through other things other than school…I look

forward to Saturday's (when the programmatic activities take place) to be able to

teach without boundaries.

He articulates a powerful dynamic that mentoring brings for the mentor to teach the

mentee organically. By bonding with the young men at a more personal level, this

mentors' insight shares a solution to effectively break the prison pipeline with the ability

to "teach without boundaries". Getting in the community and becoming part of a viable

solution to the problems young black men face today is the benefit that has enriched him

through this process.

Similar to Jamal, Terrell expresses growth in his own personal development. He states:

I'm realizing that I wasn't so patient before. And I feel I'm becoming much more

patient… you're dealing with a bunch of teenagers, you know, sometimes it's like,

what are ya'll doing? You almost start getting mad, it's like no, get it together,

now do this… I guess I don't need to be so rigid. (laughter) You know what I'm

saying?... that was something that I learned about myself and something that I

could potentially grow within myself as well, just a little more patience and

understanding…You know and I realize that with them…it helped me to grow a

little bit more there, so we're out and about in like a group, like we're going to a

certain activity or we're hoping on this bus or umm we're doing whatever in the

community and it's just like okay, stay on track, you know, stay on track, it's like

kind of ridged you know what I mean? But I'm relaxed a lot more, I'm just like

things can just flow, let it be, so that's ya that helped me

As he expressed in his statement, he is growing more patient and learning about himself.

From these skills, he could potentially translate them to other arenas that are outside of

mentoring; using mentoring as a vehicle to foster his own personal development.

Another benefit to the mentors is the cultivation of skills from mentorship. Darius

provides insight by stating:

it's been really good umm kind of enlightening and I think we have a lot of like

interesting conversations with the other mentors about umm different like ideas,

it's a really informative, kind of rewarding thing…I think I'm learning that

because I communicate like better now that I've been doing this because it's when

you begin talking to someone or talking to a group who is a lot different than you,

has kind of a different background you learn to be more adaptable, I guess. In

your communication skills… I think it does help me understand myself because I

kind of see like where my faults are, what I'm good at, you know, so you can kind

of, you know, know myself a bit better because of that

From the mentoring Darius has gained personal rewards of not only learning more about

himself, but also more skills and attributes that he can add. There is a sense of reward by

engaging with and having a network with other mentors the share conversations. Also,

relating with kids that have diverse experiences pushes the mentor to mold and translate his skills to better connect.

In conclusion, the Mentor benefits theme provides insights about what mentors gain throughout the process. Highlights include: providing self-growth by being confronted by ones own internalized negative stereotypes of the Black male population, growing a sense of confidence with self-identity, having a vehicle to teach without boundaries, and the growth of personal development with the cultivation of skills. These were all ways the mentor benefited from engaging in the process.

Mentor Modeling

Role models can be extremely influential in determining behavior and creating pathways for one to model. This modeling can create a blueprint as a map to influence others to follow the same pathway. Thus, these blueprints become realistically attainable by having a living map to follow with guidance. During the interviews the mentors shared discussion on the impact that their own mentors had on their development and the ways in which they modeled their own behaviors for the mentees own development. This role modeling fell into two categories:

- The mentor's self-conscious view of self, world, and possibilities
- The impact of mentor's view of their own mentoring relationships

Jalen addressed how his own view of possibilities have been positively influenced through others role modeling. He states:

now that I'm settled in Minnesota, I'm kinda like thinking about moving to a whole another state. Like, this is where your friends are and like your core base. And [my mentor] just took the chance and left from here. He went to California and didn't know anybody. He had like stayed in a hotel until he could get his first paycheck to put a down payment on an apartment. So seeing him take those risks and those jumps encourages me to do that, 'cause I want to go out of state. Maybe Raleigh, NC where he is now, and just see that it is possible and doesn't make it as scary when you see someone else do it and they were successful at it, so it's doable

From these statements, it can be understood that others behavior and actions can influence our own, but also at the same time provide us motivation in pursuing our own risks. By witnessing his mentor achieve a task, Jalen sees the possibility of attainment. Wanting to take that leap of faith and succeed empowers others to want take action as well.

When asked about specific behaviors he models for his mentee, Jalen states:

maturity, I would say, I mean he's at 13, so we're all immature at that age, but I feel like, I'm trying to make responsible decisions, or if like I mess up in archery or something, or showing him it's not the end of the world, I don't go like, huff and puff and this is stupid, and so just show him, oh whatever, like I'll just keep going like it's no big deal. So trying to really, even sometimes I get irritated, but I have to remember, oh if I do that he's just going to think it's acceptable, I don't

know, probably very specifically trying to stay positive in a lot of the activities we

do, whether it gets hard, or I'm tired I'm not really into it, I'll still act like I'm

into it, just to show him it's all about the attitude you have, so I really try and like

monitor my level of positivity around him, like consciously

As a mentor, when in the presence of the mentee, it is extremely important to show how to act in given situations. From the insight that Jalen has provided we can understand that mentees follow behavior and actions that they see others that they look up to doing. Therefore, it is extremely important, as mentor, to intentionally model actions that are for the betterment of the collective of those around you.

Jamal discusses how others around him provided a great influence on him. From that great influence that they had it propelled him in many directions of own personal growth. He states:

I have had various other mentors and sometimes they didn't even necessarily go

under the title of mentor but one guy that did have great influence on me…was

just pushing myself to read more, gain more knowledge and he's the one that

really put some growth within me, instilled that growth…gave me some

knowledge on how to purchase my house…They were telling me about all the

steps I had to go through and that gave me the ability and to do it, making me,

you know, the security to do it because I was insecure about that experience.

Thinking about buying a house is a major thing but once it is, but once you get

that knowledge it's not so major… you know kind of giving me that inside, you

know, these are my experiences. So, I have knowledge or shared experience with

them knowing that it's—I'm not alone and what I'm experiencing and that this is

a common theme for me…tell me how to engage in conversations with people and

let me know all the negatives or the poor choices I made…don't show that I'm

insecure, don't show that I'm not happy with myself or have low self-esteem or

something. Don't negate the fact that they gave you a compliment, just accept it.

So, things of that nature…ya, they're modeling it, they're coaching…I mean you

often kind of chose who your mentor is and ahh, you don't necessarily have to ask

permission sometimes [the person] just becomes your mentor and it's usually

people who have great influences and you look up to them and so then you just

kind of take mental notes when you're interacting with them

Here Jamal starts by discussing how informal the title of mentor is to the ones that have

had a great influence on him. He gives specific examples of how they have pushed him to

become better fiscally, relationally, and also ways in obtain a sense of security within

himself. They have provided him guidance in all these areas to push his growth within.

When discussing about what he models for his mentee, Jamal states:

I'm studying so we're going to study so that's good but that's also him wanting to

do that because the last go around I gave him the option we could study, we could

watch a basketball game or something else, I think trying to get those tickets to

the science museum or something close and he chose studying…I want him to see

me studying. I want to model that for him umm, music I thought about that

because if I'm giving him a ride in my car what kind of music should I be playing

and not playing…I'm making sure that I'm not cussing and talking about, I

thought about, you know, trying not to explore, you know, talking about women

too much because that's gone through my mind

Jamal goes to discuss how he makes sure to model out specific actions for his mentee to follow. He talks about this self-conscious modeling and how it can be reflected on the mentee. The importance of studying, the music that is played while the mentee is in the car, the conversations that are had about women; all these are occurrences of behavior the mentor has laid to follow in order that the mentee has proper influence.

DeShawn lists out specific mentors that have been of great influence to him and what knowledge they have bestowed upon him. He says:

[my female mentor] she's been a mentor, she's the one that got me into Freedom

School (summer program for K-12 graders to increase reading comprehension

skills) fifteen years ago. So, I've known her for a long time, she's really huge

influence in my life as far as helping me along the path of being an educator. She

works… so I've known her for a long time and I also ahh the principal when I

worked at Jackson, [male mentor], he's the at Capitol Hill now. He's was a huge

mentor to me as well, he taught me about how to be a really good principal. I

have been around a few principals to know that there's good principals that are

good and principals that are not good. And he really taught me that if I ever went

in the principal direction how to be a really good principal so I always look to

him as a mentor of mine. I don't communicate with him as much as I do with

[female mentor] but I still consider him a mentor because he really taught me a

lot in the eight years—six years I was underneath him

DeShawn captures mentors that he has gained from and have had a great influence on his

own life by providing him guidance down the path of being an educator. His mentors

provided him with maps of knowledge to blueprint different routes he could take in his

own life; they modeled that for him. Teaching and providing him insights as role models

that had a great influence on him.

DeShawn then goes on to discuss the importance of his own presence for the youth

within the program. Also, he goes on to discuss his own actions he wants them to learn

from and the intentionality behind it by stating:

It [is] important that young men see me consistently there. To see somebody, you

know, there are people here that care, you know, they want to see you be

successful in life and they want you to, you know, follow right paths so, I enjoy, I

really do and when I miss, when I don't go on Saturday it changes me…. I never

thought that I would be excited about waking up earlier on a Saturday (laughter)

… but, I love to get up on a Saturday to go and meet with these young people

because these are young men who can really do some great things with the right

direct... I haven't met one who I feel like cannot be molded into something

important in the future…Language…They're around so much negative language,

the "N" word being dropped everywhere they go, you know, we take a conscious

effort to speak I won't say proper, but speak, you know, like you're supposed to

speak…and let them know, you know, you don't always have to cuss or use the

"N" word, there's so many words in the vocabulary that you can use.

He explains how important his own role is as a mentor for the youth to see him consistently there. DeShawn provides the youth with a positive direction; he uses language as an example of ways he provides role modeling.

Role models provide great influence on shaping one's own path to follow. These mentors discussed how their own mentors changed their own perceptions, but also how they look to impact and model pathways for the mentees to follow. Furthermore, providing a blueprint of various maps to pick and chose from; becoming a mentor to model after.

From my findings I have developed them into four connected themes to represent the collective data set. These four include: Combative Influence of Black Identities, Relationship Connectivity, Mentor Benefits, Mentor Modeling. Although these themes are respectfully different, they all stem from the shared stories that these Black mentors provided. With Combative Influence of Black Identities as the overarching theme, the themes all support each other. Furthermore, this created a holistic picture of the shared experiences, stories, narratives, and thoughts of these Black male mentors and their response to the process and power of mentoring. These findings seek to provide understanding of the phenomenology in experiences and perceptions that Black male mentors not only endure, but go through as participants within a mentoring organization.

In totality, the findings added multiple dimensions to create a holistic picture of the experiences and perceptions of a Black male mentor. Creating an understanding of their shared experiences, stories, narratives, and thoughts from a phenomenological perspective provides insights from these Black male mentors. By using the themes of: Combative Influence of Black Identities, Relationship Connectivity, Mentor Benefits, and Mentor Modeling, the findings aimed to make a simplified sense of understanding bigger complexities.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question: *What are the experiences and perceptions of Black male mentors in a mentoring organization?* As stated earlier, the data collected in this study included the narratives of five Black male mentors as participants. It is of extreme importance to emphasize that the intention is not to generalize these experiences and perceptions for those of all Black male mentors, but they can be used a way transfer knowledge and understanding. This study was conducted to extract meaning from the role of Black male mentors in a specific local context: New Lens Urban Mentoring Society. This was researched to grasp the complexity of their shared narratives and simplify it for readers to better understand the depth of the Black male mentors as participants within New Lens Urban Mentoring Society. The findings of this study developed into four themes that include: *Combative Influence of Black Identities, Relationship Connectivity, Mentor Benefits* and *Mentor Modeling*.

Combative Influence of Black Identities focuses on how the positive image of the Black male mentor challenges the false perceptions of the Black male identity.

Relationship Connectivity discusses the process of developing relationships with mentees. *Mentor Benefits* provide insights from what mentors gain as participants throughout the process. Lastly, *Mentor Modeling* which discusses how mentors are role models for mentees.

The findings of this study are unique in that it provides culturally validating language for Black males as mentors in the American societal context. This act of mentorship has been deeply embedded into the Black culture and these findings give language the further validate the practice. Furthermore, these findings highlight implications for further mentor training, mentoring organizations, and also mentor research; all in relation to mentoring. These implications from the findings will be discussed in detail below.

These findings can also be further explored through the ecological lens which suggests the potential influences of development for the Black male mentor (see Figure 2). As we can understand the microsystem is what direct impacts the development of the Black male mentor (i.e. family, socio-economic status, living environment, peers). Leading into the mesosystem, this is where the interactions of the various elements in the microsystem occur with the individual. This system includes the relationship between family members, interactions with their living environment, socializations with their peers, etc. The mentors discussed these same various elements during their interviews. For example, the insight on the importance of building positive relationships with other Black males to influence their own development directly relates to the mesosystem in this theory. Transitioning into the exosystem, this system is the connectivity between a social

setting that the individual has no active role in correlation with his immediate context. Extracting from the findings, there were numerous occasions when the mentors discussed the negative stereotypes, dominant discourse narratives, and other influences that all directly impacted the identity and development of the Black male mentor and perceived opportunities. These mentors shared the motivation to deconstruct those narratives by using mentoring as a vehicle to combat against them for the betterment of survival for younger Black males.

Lastly is the macrosystem; this is the outermost system that impacts the individuals' development. As the ecological systems go further out from the center, individuals have less influence on the impact of those dimensions. Macrosystems are those that tend to be more grounded in societal perceptions. For the focus of this study, this perception is that of the Black male mentor in the American societal context. The overarching theme in this study, Combative Influence of Black Identities, can be directly tied back to the ecological system. This is where the mentors heavily discussed combating the systematic oppression of the Black male and how they as Black male mentors work against those systems. For example, when one mentor discussed the overall Black condition within this societal context. He spoke about the overall plight of the Black male in the nation and how it can deeply affect the individual. Furthermore, there were multiple instances where the subject of incarceration, thug life, and miseducation came about. All these statements indicated give better conceptualized understanding of ecological systems the effect the human development of the Black male mentor.
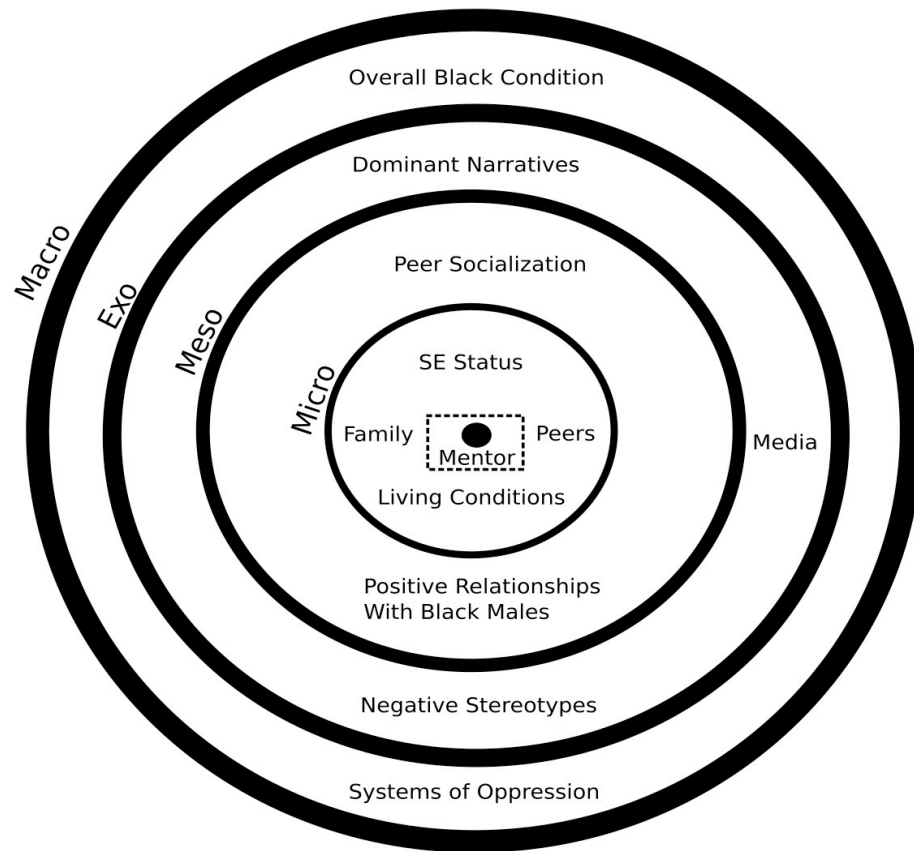
Ecological Context of Black Male Mentors

Overall Black Condition

Dominant Narratives

Peer Socialization

Macro

Exo

Meso

Micro

SE Status

Family   Mentor   Peers

Living Conditions

Media

**Positive Relationships
With Black Males**

Negative Stereotypes

Systems of Oppression

Figure 2. Bronfrenbrenner's developmental ecology model adapted from findings

Implications for Mentor Training

The findings in this study inform proper mentor training strategies to be implemented. The mentors interviewed addressed the importance of building a strong relationship but also the real struggles of actually developing one. By informing the mentor of the potential struggles that may happen while trying to build that mentor-mentee relationship can help the mentor to better properly prepare for their role. When

mentors are trained in to carry out their role, highlighting the honest struggles and providing potential strategies, as shown in the findings, can alleviate the relational anxiety they may have initially. One way the mentors can best prepare for these issues and challenges is using the findings above as case studies to analyze and discuss in detail during training sessions. The findings also suggest how a Black male mentor must understand all the negative energy that must be worked against. Placing this in the forefront of the Black male mentors' mind while conducting the training further promotes the importance of creating a need to shift the narrative of the Black male identity to be one of positivity. When training in Black male mentors the focus on the need for a positive light in the identity of the Black male needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the findings also suggest how the Black male mentor places the need to make sure he is extremely conscious of his own behavior around the mentee. The interviewees discussed how, as a role model, a mentor can have great influence on shaping the mentees own path. With this focus on the training it validates the importance of the mentor's behavior and actions and how it can influence the mentee. Mentoring benefits, such as the growth of personal development, provides clarity in the types of benefits the mentor can obtain from his participation in his role. This is not only beneficial from the training aspect, but also from the standpoint of the organization as well. The ability to provide language around the potential benefits mentors get from participating in the organization gives clear incentives for the mentor to become a participant.

Implications for Mentoring Organizations

Mentoring organizations, working with a population of Black males, must take a communal approach to mentoring rather than an individual approach to their organizational culture and programmatic elements. From drawing on the findings there was a shared consensus on the value of community within the organization that the mentors participated in. These Black male mentors discussed how all participants in the organization were closely connected. This relationship connectivity cultivated a sense of brotherhood and established community within the organization. That brotherhood between the participants, created a sense of community that viewed each other as family and not just individual participants. These findings suggest the importance of community when working with Black male populations as a mentoring organization. This importance needs to be established within the organizational framework to culturally align with the Black males that they serve. Furthermore, connecting it back to the literature, one can better understand the impact of communalism and the influence it has on the collective cultural memory of Blacks. As a mentoring organization working with the Black male population, practical implementations of a community concept need to be prioritized in order to stay congruent with its participants.

Another area of implication for mentoring organizations is the need for spaces in order to translate meaningful teachings, with very little restrictions, that have great impact. Drawing on my findings, the mentors discussed how they used mentoring as a vehicle to drive home messages. This value was discussed as a positive benefit while being a mentor (see Mentor Benefits and Relationship Connectivity). From the findings,

these Black male mentors gave insight in how successful mentoring is the ability to "teach without boundaries." By building a bond with the mentee and providing insights that extends beyond the classroom was the method these Black male mentors used to drive home messages, as a solution to the problems young Black men are facing today. The focus on cultivating these spaces for this transfer of knowledge to take place needs to be adopted for a mentoring organization working with Black males. For mentoring organizations, programmatic components must have space to transfer meaning knowledge that aligns with its mission. For New Lens Urban Mentoring Society, they use various programmatic activities to translate the communicative importance of their overall mission (to improve the quality of lives for Black males). This same practice can be further used by other mentoring organizations in their local context.

Implications for Mentor Research

This study also points towards a potential theory worth addressing and creating a body of literature on. From the conceptual framework stated earlier I used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory to better understand the human development of the Black male mentor. This theoretical framework helps to provide meaning to the findings in connection with the Black male mentor development. Bronfenbrenner's theory focuses on the development of the individual within relation to the multiple environments that he/she may be in contact with. It then breaks it down into four systems: *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem*.

As stated previously, the *microsystem* is the relations between the individual in an immediate setting (family, home, living environment, etc.). *Mesosystem* are the

interactions the individual has with the immediate settings (i.e. school, peer group, camp, places of worship). The *exosystem* is the connection of the mesosystem with other social structures that affect the persons' immediate settings (mass media, governments, employment, neighborhood). *Macrosystem* is the umbrella patterns of the culture (economic, social, educational, legal, political) creating the manifestations in the other systems (micro, meso, and exo). This theory pushes for the focus of the Black male mentor as the individual at the center with the various ecological systems around him

Furthermore, there are other research inquires this study prompts. These questions include: How do in-school mentoring programs compare with the out-of-school programs in effectiveness? What ways can mentor organizations stay culturally aligned to serve the Black male population? How can Black male mentors successfully cultivate relationships with young Black males for positive impact? There may also be other potential questions that I have not addressed from the body of this study. This study can be further used to generate new questions around Black male mentors' experiences and perceptions, and also provide a framework to build from and continue to grow a body of literature on.

The purpose of this study was conducted to investigate and make meaning of the experiences and perceptions of Black male mentors from their own shared narratives. Their insights provided a way for this study to make meaning through the lens of the Black male mentors that participated. Through the findings of this study I propose how mentorship can continue to be a future success for Black male development. Although this study provides a small window of conceptual understanding, I attest that more work needs to be to study the Black male mentor and his role in Black male development.

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Exempt from full review. U of M IRB study number 1601E82904.

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study of examining the experiences and perceptions of Black male mentors within a mentoring organization. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a Black male mentor in the organization I am conducting the study in. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Eskender Yousuf, MA Candidate in the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning.

Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: providing me with an interview that will be recorded. This interview will be about your experiences and perceptions as a mentor in this organization and should be no longer than 1 hour.

Confidentiality
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish this, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researches will have access to the records. I will have access to the recordings. The will be used to document the interview and will be erased after this study is concluded.

Voluntary Nature of the Study
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or New Lens Urban Mentoring Society. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions
The researcher(s) conducting this study is Eskender Yousuf. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at 651-494-8553 and/or yousu014@umn.edu. You may also contact the advisor Dr. Rashne Jehangir at 612-625-3551 and/or jehan001@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; 612-625-1650

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Interview Protocol

Experience and perceptions of mentoring
- Have you had any mentors? What were some of the positives and negatives that they contributed to your life?

- What mentors do you have now that are adding something positive to your life?

- Why do you think mentoring young Black men is important?

- What experiences have you had working with groups of young Black men?

Experiences and perceptions of New lens
- How did you get involved with New Lens?

- What's it been like for you to be a NL mentor?

- How is the mentoring process going for you?

- What are you learning (about yourself; about what it takes to be a good mentor) in this process?

    ○ Does being a NL mentor help you better understand yourself? How?
    ○ Has mentoring helped build new relationships? Boosted your self-worth?
    ○ Has mentoring helped you explore any career options?

- How has your career path and future goals influenced your mentor / mentee relationship?

Mentoring and relationship with mentees
- What is your relationship like with your mentee?

- How close / connected do you feel to them?
- How is your mentee reacting to you?
    ○ Are they showing any signs of appreciation?

- How similar was your childhood to your mentees?

- Tell me about a time with your mentee where things really clicked with the two of you – what did that look like?

- What are some of the qualities or behaviors that you are modeling for your mentee?

- What progression/changes in behavior/attitude have you seen with mentee?

- Are there some things that you see with your mentee that happened to you?

- What do you see as the most important things that mentees ought to get out of the program? (Beliefs, skills, think broadly here)

- What is your relationship like with your mentee's parents / caregivers?

- Do you feel they support your mentoring activities?