

## **Race and ethnicity in mentoring relationships**

Dr. Sanchez began her talk about individual differences by setting up a hypothetical situation. Picture a relationship between a white, middle-class mentor Ellen and a Hispanic recent immigrant Louisa. Ellen asks Louisa where she is thinking about going to college, to which Louisa lists off a number of local colleges in the area. Ellen suggests that Louisa should go somewhere away from home so that she can establish independence. Louisa says that she thinks her parents would not let her do this and does not think it is possible. What might be the repercussions for the mentoring relationship?

Clearly Ellen is well-intentioned. But what if Louisa takes these ideas back home and her family erupts at the suggestion? Louisa's parents might become angry and refuse to let Louisa meet with Ellen anymore. An unfortunate termination of a positive connection can be caused by simple cultural misunderstanding.

Researchers are just beginning to outline the questions that they have for this new area of research and how they want to answer them.

What research we do have has revealed some very interesting, if inconsistent, findings. Intuition tells us that mentoring matches between individuals from the same racial/ethnic background should be most successful. After all, most naturally occurring mentor-protégé pairs are found in a young person's community where they are surrounded by people from similar backgrounds as themselves. But it isn't always the case that these types of relationships are most successful in a formal mentoring program. Some things to be considered about race and ethnicity are:

- **Differences within “cultures.”** For example, while both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are considered to be “Latino,” the two groups come from different places and have very different backgrounds. In Chicago, for instance, there is a long-standing rivalry between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.
- **Differences within racial groups.** For example, both Ethiopian-heritage black families and African American black families are considered “black” but have very different backgrounds and do not necessarily have common viewpoints based on their “race.”

In her work researching individual differences Dr. Sanchez specialized in working with Latino youth. One study that she conducted asked whether there was a difference between familial and non-familial mentoring relationships. Two things emerged from this study:

- Non-familial mentors had more education than familial mentors, and;
- Youth with non-familial mentors tended to have higher educational aspirations and expectations.

Thus while youth may be able to relate to someone from a similar cultural background on a more personal level, there can be other benefits to gain from individuals from a dissimilar background.

No solid conclusions can be drawn, yet, about race and ethnicity in mentoring relationships. However, in dealing with culturally and racially diverse youth there are a number of important things that adults should keep in mind:

- **Stereotype threat.** If the youth in a relationship is from a minority community and the mentor has stereotyped ideas about issues relating to that group, those stereotypes are more likely to occur. (For more information on stereotype threat see articles and work by Claude Steele).
- **Cultural mistrust.** Young people that have cultural mistrust will tend to think that members from their own cultural group are better role models than those from other cultures.
- **The cultural sensitivity of the mentor.** One study with Latina girls found that the girls felt more comfortable around adults and mentors that they identified as “culturally sensitive” than those that were not culturally sensitive.

*Information for this article was taken from Gender, Ethnicity, Development and Risk: Mentoring and the Consideration of Individual Differences, Darling, et. al. and The Role of Race and Ethnicity in Mentoring Relationships, Dr. Bernadette Sanchez, University of Minnesota Extension, Nov. 14, 2007*