Keeping Hope Alive: Mentoring African American Male Social Workers and Students

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Abstract: In this article, I describe the forces that influenced my decision to become a social worker and mentor. I detail the relationship between growing up as a "Y Kid" and my decision to become engaged in the life-long mentoring process. While telling my story, I explore value-driven role modeling, the process of selecting mentees and mentors through attraction rather than promotion, and the concept of developmental networks. Finally, I share the lessons learned from more than fifty years of involvement in the mentoring process.

Keywords: mentoring; mentor; social work; African American; YMCA; adolescent males

I remember as if it were yesterday, when the Stingly boys moved in just two doors from our house. There were three boys in total in the new family. How exciting! Now there were more boys in the neighborhood to play baseball. We were getting closer to having enough boys to play a real game in the backyard. The middle boy, Wayne, was four years older than me and Junior was six years older than me. I was excited about the possibility of having a new playmate. The Stinglys were an interesting family. Very soon after they moved in, you could hear their sister, Anna, playing the piano and singing church songs. The entire family including their grandparents regularly attended church services together. They were "sanctified."

I couldn't keep up with Wayne and Harold. They were too strong, too fast, and far too advanced in every sport that we played, from marbles and spinning tops to baseball, swimming, running track, and football. Wayne and Harold were different from the other boys. In addition to being athletic, they were courteous, polite, and mannerable. They didn't use profanity when the adults were not around and they always seemed to behave the same way. They weren't "some-timey." They were consistently well-behaved young men. I noticed something else about Wayne and Harold. Most all the other young boys looked-up to them and listened when they spoke. Wayne and Harold were intelligent and deeply committed to their religious beliefs. I didn't know it at the time but Wayne and Harold were my first mentors.

I had heard the word mentor but I did not know what it meant. Even today, mentoring means different things in different places at different times. Mentoring has been defined paradoxically, making it difficult to examine in systematic ways (Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1988). In light of this lack of clarity, Kram's (1988) more general definition of developmental relationships and original idea that mentoring takes place over time – with multiple individuals including senior individuals, peers, and community members – have informed this narrative (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Developmental relationships are understood as associations between senior (i.e., faculty) and junior individuals (i.e., faculty and students), focused on the junior member's personal and/or career development and growth. While I was not yet a faculty person, I was junior to Wayne and Harold. The focus of our relationship was on my personal, social, and athletic growth and development.

I would later learn that their consistency, commitment, and passion were signs of value-driven leadership (Malphurs, 1996). During the school year, Wayne and Harold would come home immediately after school and then leave the neighborhood without saying a word. I wondered what was going on. Our neighborhood was filled with gangs, crime, drugs, and violence. I was fairly young when I learned that I lived in a ghetto and exactly what that meant. One day I was able to catch up to Wayne before he made his quick get-away. I asked, "Where are you going?" He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Man, I'm going to the 'Y' and you ought to go with me." I respected and admired Wayne and knew that he would not want me to go anywhere that would not be good for me. But at first I didn't think I could go to this

unknown place. The next moment, as he ran off, I suddenly shouted, "I'll ask my Mom if I can go tomorrow!"

I followed Wayne and Harold over to the neighborhood Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and a whole new world was opened for me. I knew instantly that I would never be the same again. Over the next twelve years, I would go the YMCA six days a week and sometimes seven. Wayne and Harold continued to mentor me from childhood to adolescence and right into high school. I was a "Y kid." As I reflect back, I now understand that an important part of my mentee experience was the introduction and connection to a larger network of individuals. This became my developmental network. The mentors at the YMCA were diverse in talents, skills, and areas of interest and expertise. Some were superior athletes while others were academics and focused the importance of education. My network included skilled outdoors folks as well as group leaders. Still others were into arts and crafts. Members of my mentoring network had several things in common. Most of them were social workers. They all worked to put Christian principles into practice through programs and activities focused on building healthy spirits, minds, and bodies for all.

The YMCA was racially and ethnically very diverse. There were Italians, Lithuanians, Jews, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, African Americans, Phillipinos, and Native Americans. Mentors were well represented from across the spectrum of races. While race oftentimes represents an easily recognizable difference between mentors and mentees, race was rarely an issue of concern. During the turbulent 1960s things changed. Race became an important issue at the neighborhood YMCA. "White flight" became a reality and the community changed to 99.9% African American. As time passed, the Civil Rights Era and the emergence of the equally important Black Consciousness Movement influenced the racial make-up of our neighborhood YMCA's staff and mentors.

Consequently, it became increasingly more important to have African American male role models and mentors. Trust and opportunities to build relationships with white male mentors

appeared to diminish, or at best became strained. Research supports the significant association between the race of protégés and their mentors, suggesting that a strong bias prevails toward "like mentoring like," or same-race relationships (Collins, Kamya, & Tourse, 1997). Seeing someone who looked like me, who shared similar backgrounds and roots, and who was accessible seemed to make common sense in terms of building trust while taking and giving directions. Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller (2011) reported that benefits of same race mentoring relationships are particularly evident among students from underrepresented groups. Among nearly a thousand students the majority reported that having a mentor of one's own gender or race was important to them. Students also reported receiving more help. Conversely, Blake-Beard et al. (2011) reported that matching race or gender did not affect academic outcomes.

While I had a host of new mentors at the YMCA, Wayne continued to maintain contact with me once he began to attend college away from home. In my teens, I would spend weekends with Wayne at State University. He encouraged me to do well in school and to be sure to continue my education through college. The next step for me at the YMCA involved learning how to mentor, lead, and teach other youth how to grow and develop, using YMCA principles in recreational and social activities. I understood very early on at the YMCA that I had a responsibility to help others. I learned the lesson of giving back at the YMCA. Once I learned how to swim, I understood that I had to teach others how to swim. I was eager to mentor other younger boys. At the same time, I continued receiving the mentoring from older and more experienced mentors. I was convinced; I would become a social worker.

I worked at the YMCA after school and throughout summer vacation during my teens and early adulthood. There were many youth who enjoyed and benefited from the mentoring relationships for many, many years. Similar to other community programs, the YMCA institutionalized their mentoring system. The Y gave attention to role modeling, reciprocity, service to others, and the importance of educational achievement for raising up a cadre of successful African American social workers and professionals (Pomeroy & Steiker,

2011). I was convinced that my life would have been disastrous had it not been for my YMCA experience. Moreover, I decided that I would become a social worker and spend my life exemplifying YMCA principles in service to others.

As a result of the Y's mentoring system, I was advised and counseled before I completed undergraduate study by YMCA mentors. I was fortunate that when I entered graduate social work school, I was directed to contact an African American advisor at the graduate program who was also a "Y Kid." Yet when I arrived none of that mattered. I was still scared to death. The environment was intimidating and almost overwhelming. The buildings were large and the rooms had tall ceilings. I was entering a predominately white institution of higher learning, with mostly white faculty, staff, and students. The environment was intimidating and yet softened by what would happen next. I finally met an African American man in a position of power (faculty and advisor) who presented himself as committed to supporting, guiding, and helping me through the process of completing graduate study in social work. He calmed my concerns and gave me hope that I could complete the MSW program. He was from the community of African American males who had grown-up in the YMCA system.

It was somewhat settling to see a Black man who was successfully maintaining a position in this cold and threatening place. Students need role models they can relate to for advice and encouragement. Ensher and Murphy (1997) found that protégés were more satisfied with mentors whom they perceived as similar to them. I had traveled quite a distance along the course of life and yet I would return to the fundamentals that I learned at the Y. At first it seemed different – because of my age – to take direction from my faculty advisor. But I was convinced from all that I could see that I was being led by a person committed to YMCA principles. Similar to my lifelong experiences at the YMCA, here was a person who demonstrated positive role modeling, service to others, and the importance of educational attainment. I knew those principles when I saw them in action. I kept saying to myself over and over again, "After all, he was from the Y. I could trust him and follow his guidance and direction." In short, it became easier for me to

adjust to the new situation and to succeed.

Paying It Forward: Mentoring African American Male Social Workers and Students

My decision to become a social worker and my subsequent professional experience are connected to my YMCA experience. My social work rests firmly upon the values, principles, and approaches I learned at the Y. With consistent mentoring from YMCA staff, I managed to defy the odds of growing-up in the ghetto. I patterned my style of mentoring on the positive role models I had along the way. I gave back by helping others. I committed myself to academic and educational achievement. I had successfully completed high school, undergraduate, and graduate study. For many in my neighborhood this was a miraculous feat. Above all, I connected with educational and professional mentors who added many fine details to the portrait of the mentor that I would later become. Consequently, I have dedicated much of my professional efforts to mentoring social workers in a variety of settings.

Today, over fifty years after beginning my YMCA experience, building relationships and networks with same race mentors remains important. Mentors and mentees bond together around the common experience of race. But same race alone does not guarantee successful mentoring matches and strong relationships among mentor and mentee. I spend a considerable amount of time and energy with mentees discussing social work practice, research, and personal matters. My commitment is for life, with the understanding that we are all a part of a larger network of professionals dedicated to living out the same set of values. I have worked hard on my mentoring relationships. Through role-modeling, I seek to be an example for my mentees.

Trust in the mentoring has not been automatic because we share the same race. I soon learned that one of the weaknnesses of same race mentoring relationships is assuming that I would be trusted because we shared the same race. That was a big mistake. In fact, often the opposite is true. Building trust takes time and work. Gaddis (2012) suggests that the amount of time invested in a mentoring relationship and the level of trust placed in the mentor are the most important facets of a relationship to foster success. Trust in the

mentoring relationship must be earned, nurtured, and maintained through mutual honesty, openness, and the willingness to improve ourselves spiritually, mentally, and physically. Therein lies the strengths of my mentoring relationships.

Over the past twenty years, I have found myself mentoring African American male social work faculty, students, and practicing social workers. I did not recruit them. I did not select them. They selected me through attraction rather than promotion based on my life and professional experience of working with African American males. I mentored African American male social work faculty, prior to my entry into the academy, and faculty who were my senior in the academy once I entered the academy. Mentoring faculty members typically occurred outside of the physical confines of the academy. Higher education as an institution seems to constrain the behavior of younger but more senior faculty to seek guidance and support as they move along their career path. Also, much of their concerns were of a personal nature that may or may not have impacted their professional careers. I mentored African American faculty members who were my senior in the academy, but who clearly sought out my advice and counsel because of my long history of service and leadership and informal position as an elder in the African American community of men. I mentored social work faculty as they worked in community settings, either as leaders of service providing programs or while they conducted research in communities.

I mentored African American male students while practicing social work in the field at community-based organizations, as they struggled with practice issues including engaging African American males, families, and youth. In addition, I mentored students around their experiences adjusting to university life and the rigors of study. I also mentored peers who were African American male social workers in agencies as they sought to develop and implement programs targeting African American males and their families. Mentoring students, faculty, and professionals also took place in support groups organized to create a space for African American male social workers and human service professionals. Over the past fifty years, I have been mentored by and mentored scores of African American males, including senior

individuals, peers, and members of the larger community of African American men who are social workers.

Hence, I knew that I had benefited from the mentoring and realized early on that a productive and meaningful mentoring relationship could contribute to a person's self-efficacy (Hesli, DeLaat, Youde, Méndez, & Lee, 2006; Paglis, Green, & Bauert, 2006; Williams-Nickelson, 2009). I began by attracting students who were interested in working on community participatory and action research projects. There were small incentives or stipends. But more importantly, it was an opportunity for students to learn and to do service in the community. Studies indicate that students and faculty members are often most comfortable when working with people they perceive as similar to themselves (Gutierrez, 2012). We shared the common interest of building and developing communities. Faculty and students who share intellectual interests and take time to build honest communication can also overcome identity-based differences (Hill, Castillo, Ngu, & Pepion, 1999).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, my mentoring experience has been one of learning and teaching while giving back and receiving through service to others. It has been a journey with one constant, the values and principles I learned as a child at the neighborhood YMCA: positive role modeling, reciprocity (mutual shared benefit to mentor and mentee), service to others, and the importance of educational achievement. Mentoring students helped me to learn and practice social work in the "real world." With mentoring, social work students can have deeply meaningful learning experiences and make connections that help them to get in on the ground floor of employment opportunities (Poulin, Kauffman, & Silver, 2006). It continues to be satisfying to support a student's development. Most of us can think of times when our students raised our awareness of social conditions, introduced us to different cultures, or made us proud as they overcame challenges to succeed (Gutierrez, 2012). The benefits of mentoring are accrued by both mentor and mentee. Mutual and shared benefits by both the mentor and mentee are a common and repetitive theme in successful mentoring.

I learned that mentoring social workers had to go far beyond the professional and the academic realms. We dealt with personal, spiritual, political, religious, and social matters oftentimes more than we addressed professional and academic matters. Our conversations and discussions about insights into life were on multiple levels, including social and behavioral (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2005). Another important lesson is that openness and willingness to discuss a variety of life issues by both the mentor and mentee is critical to the success of the relationship. Traditional hierarchical professional social work boundaries must be stretched to allow for more open communication.

Aside from sharing the same race, I may not have the same historical background and upbringing as other African American males. It has been equally important for me to recognize the social, economic, geographical, gender choice, and biographic diversity among African American males that I have mentored. Mentoring's psychosocial functions include coaching and feedback, acceptance and confirmation, role-modeling functions, and guidance in shaping beliefs and values. Research recognizes that mentoring provides support across multiple dimensional functions: career, psychosocial, and role modeling (Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011).

African American males in the academy need the support that mentoring can potentially provide. African American male social workers are very rare in the academy today. Adding to their feelings of isolation, these are often intelligent and strong men who have been written-off by society. Black faculty can serve as exceptional models of success in the academic arena, particularly for students of color (Banks, 1984). The availability of a mentor or role model that has dealt with similar struggles appears to be important to minority student achievement (Tinto, 1993), and in many cases Black faculty have experienced struggles and barriers similar to those of students of color.

Many African American male social workers and social work students will go out into the workforce to work directly with other African American men, children, families, and communities. Furthermore, we must consider that Black professors are able to offer a unique form of support and encouragement that underrepresented students both desire and need

(Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Patton & Harper, 2003; Reddick, 2011). At best we can hope for a "snow-ball" effect. As more and more African American male social workers mentor more and more African American male social work students, we will grow the numbers of African American social workers.

Given the extreme scarcity of African American (AA) male social workers in the field and in the educational preparation pipeline juxtaposed against the dire need to increase the numbers of AA male social workers, it has become imperative for AA senior faculty to develop, promote, and support mentoring efforts targeting AA male faculty, students, and practitioners. In over more than fifty years of study and practice, I have identified three hallmarks of African American social work heritage as loyalty, self-help, and mutual aid. These three hallmarks should guide the intentional mentoring efforts to build developmental relationships and networks to mitigate the current and historical shortage of African American male social workers.

In the same way that the YMCA once provided tier or generational mentoring, while building developmental relationships and networks, I have utilized rites of passages and mentoring programs at schools, churches, and community based organizations to mentor African American males. Further construction of the concept of developmental networks can be nurtured in the practice arena. While "the magic is in the doing," practice-based research will play a vital role in the ongoing growth of the concept of developmental networks. Individuals who strengthen their developmental networks to include multiple relationships of strong and diverse ties, are more likely to continually learn, develop, and achieve personal and professional goals through the developmental assistance that is offered by an enriched network (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Higgins, 2000; Higgins & Thomas, 2001). Similar to the YMCA environment, the social work practice and academic arenas offer numerous opportunities for diversity in mentors. At some point early in the mentoring relationship, I always explain to mentees that when I begin to mentor them they join a large "network of multiple networks" from which they can travel and expand upon to meet their personal and professional goals.

Today, I am currently mentoring a group of seven African American men who include practicing social workers and graduate and undergraduate social work students. As an elder mentor, I live out my commitment to the YMCA principle of service through "giving back" and promoting academic achievement. I would like to stress the value of documenting, evaluating, and sharing the results of the mentoring process. This is critical to building the concept of developmental relationships. My experience mirrors that of Clutterbuck, Poulsen, and Kochan (2012), who pointed out that mentoring supports and facilitates learning by both the mentor and mentee, and successful mentoring relationships can lead to liberating life changes. I continue to learn from the mentoring process, both as a mentee and as a mentor.

While social workers do not have to take a vow of poverty, historically the profession has not provided lucrative pay opportunities. Yet on the other hand, the reciprocal rewards of learning and watching others benefit through growth and development from our mutual efforts have been priceless and invaluable. I can still remember the look on my YMCA mentors' faces when they acknowledged and shared my life successes.

As a matter of course, faculty members are always building professional developmental networks to support their professional growth in the areas of research, teaching, and service. Senior and fellow faculty members along with social work students should be encouraged through participation in community-based projects to join developmental networks that promote and support the growth and development of everybody involved. Colleges and universities can support the replication of the successful mentorship of African American males by formalizing and institutionalizing mentoring programs and legitimatizing these efforts with financial support. Finally, higher educational institutions would do well to recognize the mentoring efforts of faculty members by granting credit as a part of the tenure process.

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