

# Mentoring in Context: A Comparative Study of Youth Mentoring Programs in the United States and Continental Europe

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## Abstract

Most of the existing body of research on formal youth mentoring has focused on programs in the United States, with few inquiries into how mentoring programs have taken shape in other contexts. In this article, we compare and contrast programs in the United States and continental Europe to investigate how context shapes the ways in which programs are conceived and implemented. Concerns about inequality and delinquency have been major drivers of program expansion in the United States, while concerns about the influx of migrants into linguistically and culturally homogeneous communities have fostered the expansion of programs in continental Europe. Through a series of program comparisons, we explored differences in volunteer characteristics, target populations, and how programs and benefits are construed. Implications for implementation and future research across both contexts are discussed.

## Keywords

youth mentoring, adolescents, cross-cultural, inequality, immigration

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## Introduction

Over the past 25 years, youth mentoring interventions in the United States evolved from more intensive, community-based approaches to a diverse range of programs engaging approximately 2.5 million American volunteers per year (Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes, 2017). Fueled by bipartisan support, strong advocacy, and generous funding, mentoring programs expanded in the 1980s, with efforts focused on promoting well-being and preventing problematic outcomes in vulnerable youth. Although the United States continues to account for the majority, youth mentoring programs have emerged across the globe, notably in Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and, more recently, continental Europe.

In this review, we compare and contrast the manner in which mentoring has been implemented in the United States with a sample of continental European countries and Iceland (hereafter: European). In so doing, we aim to illustrate how the motivation and implementation of mentoring reflects the broader cultural and societal context and the ways in which issues surrounding poverty, immigration, inclusion, and social mobility are inflected in approaches to youth programming. After establishing the cultural backdrop, we delve into how mentoring itself is framed, how program goals are established, and the ways mentoring is implemented. To accomplish these aims, we sampled programs in the United States and Europe to investigate differences and similarities.

### *Mentoring in the United States*

Formal mentoring programs in the United States were first launched during the Progressive Era at the turn of the 20th century and remained narrow in scope until a rapid expansion took place in the late 1980s. The first programs were launched in the context of broader societal discomfort with inequality (Trachtenberg, 1982). In the early 1900s, mounting concern over the growing ranks of children born into poverty led to the creation of a wide range of social service programs for urban, low-income youth. The growth of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (2018), the first and largest mentoring program in the United States, was fueled by a desire to rescue poor children from the results of an industrialized America: poverty and the problems of their homes and neighborhoods (Baker & Maguire, 2005; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). While issues such as immigration and poverty overlapped during this period, economic disadvantage and prevention of negative outcomes, rather than racial or social inclusion, were the drivers of the movement.

Between the late 1940s through the early 1970s, the middle class in the United States and other Western economies enjoyed rising wages and wealth security. By the late 1970s, however, the economic structures that had promoted a vibrant middle class following World War II were in a steady decline (Piketty, 2014). During the 1980s, mentoring programs began to partner with a variety of settings and experiment with alternative formats and models. Some programs then and since included the explicit infusion of cultural values and recognition of cultural strengths into mentoring (e.g., My Brother's Keeper, Amachi). However, mainstream approaches continued to be framed by the goals and values of modern conservative thinking around social mobility and "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstrap" ideology (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011).

### *Mentoring in Continental Europe*

Throughout the 1990s, mentoring programs also expanded in mostly English-speaking countries, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Colley, 2003; Miller, 2002). In the last decade, however, a nascent mentoring movement has coalesced in European countries and dozens of programs and networks have been established.

In contrast to the United States where poverty and inequality were the impetus, European expansion of mentoring programs appeared to stem from anxiety and concerns around the influx of immigrants into countries where the acquisition of the official language(s) and culture are perceived as a pathway to citizenship. In the past decade, the percentage of the foreign-born population increased in many European countries, reaching rates as high as 18% (EUROSTAT, 2017). Many Europeans are divided between narratives depicting migrants and refugees as a threat to the maintenance of the welfare state and national and religious identity (Golder, 2016) versus highlighting the need to build an intercultural society with shared values and a young workforce (Bommes & Geddes, 2003). It is no coincidence that the countries in Europe with the largest influx of immigrants have expanded mentoring most vigorously.

One of the first mentoring programs that explicitly addressed the social inclusion of immigrant children was the *Nightingale* program. *Nightingale* was launched in Malmö, Sweden, in 1997 and has expanded into other European countries since its founding. As with other programs in Europe, this focus on immigration had important implications for the programs' models. Indeed, the goal of social inclusion led to a relatively sharper focus on multiculturalism, an older mentee population, and an acknowledgment of reciprocal benefits to mentors.

In this study, we examine both historic trends and program records to explore the relative influence of inequality and immigration on the initiation of American and European mentoring programs. Within this context, we sampled both American and European programs and explored the ways in which programs differed in their approach, goals, and practices.

## Method

### Dataset

A dataset of American youth mentoring programs was constructed through a three-step process. In the first step, we reviewed statewide databases of state-specific mentoring programs (e.g., Massachusetts Mentor Partnership's "Find a Program" website). To maximize national representation, programs with branches appearing in more than three different states ( $N = 13$ ) were flagged for inclusion. Next, researchers conducted a similar review of MENTOR's national database of nearly 1,800 mentoring programs, the Mentoring Connector. The 20 most-frequently occurring programs in the database were flagged for inclusion in the sample. These 20 were then combined with the 13 programs from the state-based search, with three programs appearing on both lists, resulting in a sample of 30 programs. To ensure a diversity of programs, the remaining programs were then randomly assigned a number using Microsoft Excel's randomization function, and the 36 highest numbered were selected for review for inclusion. It was expected that not all 36 programs would have the necessary information for inclusion in the sample. Fortunately, sufficient information on each program was available, and all 36 programs were included. Rather than reduce the sample to a rounder number, we opted to include all reviewed programs as our statistical analyses would be robust to sample size differences in this range (McHugh, 2013). In sum, 66 American programs were included in the sample.

As centralized program listings were not available for European mentoring programs, the European dataset was created by exploring mentoring organizations associated with international, state-level, or regional-level mentoring networks. In parallel, we screened all mentoring organizations taking part in the following networks: *Mentor.Ring Hamburg* and *Netzwerk Berliner Kinderpatenschaften* (Germany), *Tous parrains!* (France), and *Coordinadora de Mentoría Social* (Spain). We complemented this dataset by carrying out a web search of youth mentoring programs in other European countries, such as Switzerland, Italy, and Austria. This web search was done by using "Mentoring," "Youth," "Program" as keywords in German, Italian, Spanish, and French. From a sample of 80 programs, we selected 50

programs with relevant structural information on their websites or other material that could contribute to our analysis. The 50 programs in the sample operated in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. While Iceland is not geographically a part of continental Europe, the growth of mentoring programs in that country trended with other countries included in this sample and so was included for analysis.

### *Program Characteristics*

The information gathered from each mentoring program included starting year, program type, mentor type, mentee age, target population, and mentoring match length. We also carried out a content analysis of their mission statements and program materials to code for mentoring approach and anticipated benefits.

*Types of youth.* We coded for the following target populations as specified in program materials: at-risk youth (including individual academic, behavioral, psychosocial risk, or family/neighborhood poverty); homeless or incarcerated youth; children of incarcerated parents, children of single parents; racial and ethnic minority youth; immigrant children, adolescents, or young adults; refugee children, adolescents, or young adults; sexual minority or general population (programs with no specific group of youths for their programming).

*Mentor type.* We coded for the mentor type the program recruited. Mentor types included college students, adults in general (no requirement beyond being over the age of 18), business or professional mentors (adults working in a professional field or trade), adults with a college degree, and older adults (aged 50 years and older).

*Program type.* This characteristic was drawn from the Mentoring Connector database. Programs seeking volunteer referrals through the Mentoring Connector filled out an application identifying the types of mentoring opportunities offered and primary meeting location. These designations were used to code the European mentoring programs along the same metric. The types included community-based mentoring, school-based mentoring, workplace mentoring, after-school mentoring, program-based mentoring, faith-based mentoring, and other.

*Program approach.* Programs were coded in terms of their primary emphasis on mitigation or inclusion. The mitigation approach to mentoring was delineated by programs which envisioned their primary purpose as delivering

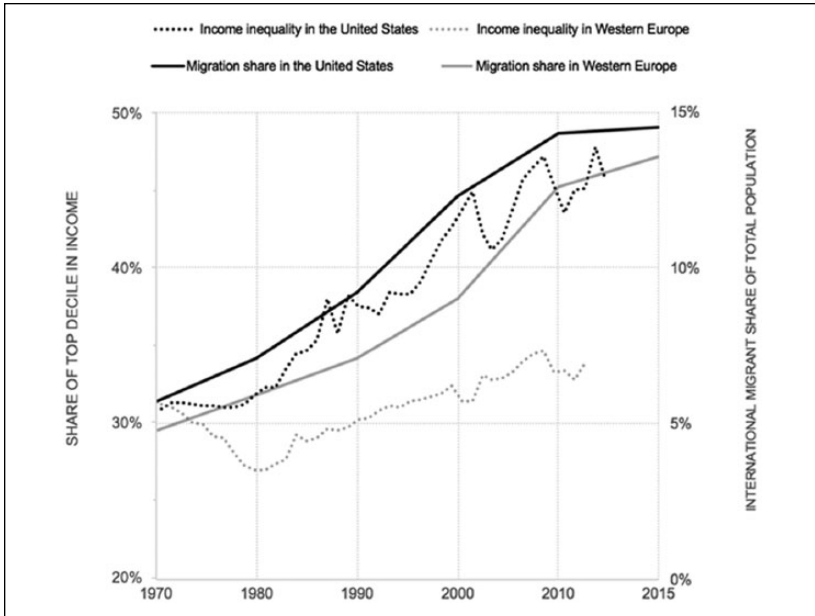
services to children who were at risk for emotional difficulties, for engaging in delinquent behavior, or suffering the consequences of poverty/ discrimination or other forms of marginalization. Examples of mitigation include “Our programs ensure the youth in our community are able to cope with the stress of growing up in low-income neighborhoods so they do not become part of the problem.”

The inclusion approach, which is rooted in the concept of positive youth development (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2018; Schwartz, Chan, Rhodes & Scales, 2013; Theokas & Lerner, 2006), appears when programs use a more prosocial framing of social inclusion, rather than emphasizing risk factors facing youth. Examples of this include “[this program] aims to improve the process of social inclusion of the children of immigrants.” In these programs, narratives around social inclusion and equity are prevalent. Other organizations may also place more emphasis on mentee’s empowerment and the need to establish intercultural friendships.

*Age range.* Programmatic offerings were coded by mentee age range as indicated in information provided by program materials and websites. This was done by creating a range of ages and coding whether a program offered services to a mentee in each year. The range of ages spanned from less than 5 years of age to greater than 25 years of age.

*Directionality of mentoring benefits.* This characterization was based on the manner in which programs discussed the benefits of mentoring. Programs coded as “unidirectional” listed the benefits of the mentoring relationships only as they pertained to the mentee. Conceptualizations indicative of this approach included phrases such as “You have the opportunity to help shape a child’s future for the better by empowering him or her to achieve.” This designation also included an absence of discussion around benefits for the mentor in a program’s website or material. Bidirectional programs included descriptions of the benefits received by a mentor through their participation. For example, “Our dedicated volunteer mentors grow from their experiences with students, . . . and gain a valuable résumé asset and a network of like-minded professionals.”

*Language emphasis.* As part of our efforts to explore the role of migration, the analysis took into account whether programs explicitly or implicitly alluded to the linguistic benefits for mentees. Some examples of benefits were related to learning the new language. One example of this is “. . .to learn German so they can relate fluently with others” or the linguistic codes for navigating in the new context “to more deeply understand how the new culture and society work.”



**Figure 1.** Income inequality and migrant share of total population in the United States and in Western Europe (1970-2015).

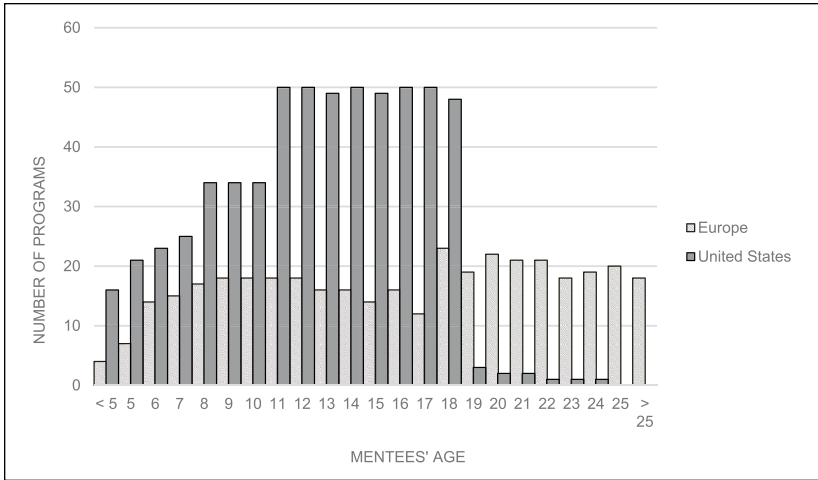
Source. Data from the World Wealth and Income Database and the Migration Policy Institute (2017).

To explore mentoring programs' cultural context, we looked at trends in inequality, immigration, and mentoring program initiation in the United States and Europe. We then conducted a content analysis of how programs described their target population, goals, and benefits. Comparisons were made using Chi-Square Tests of Independence and Fisher's Exact Test.

## Results

### *Mentoring Program Development*

Figure 1 depicts the trends in income inequality in the United States and Europe, as well as the growth of international migration share of total population since 1970. There was a significant growth in U.S. income inequality in the 1980s, whereas Europe remained more stable over the same period. The United States and Europe experienced similar trends in immigration over this time period, with Europe experiencing sharper growth than the United States



**Figure 2.** Histogram representing mentees' age of the selected mentoring programs in the United States and Europe, 2017.

Source. Data from the Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring database.

Note.  $n = 66$  (the United States) and 50 (Europe).

between 2000 and 2015. In 2015 alone, German officials registered more than 1 million new arrivals, mostly Syrians and Afghans trying to escape from war (Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, 2016).

In the United States, the median first year of program operation was in 1993. Almost half of mentoring programs in the U.S. sample were established between 1989 and 1999 (44.2%), a period marked by a spike in income inequality. In Europe, the median was 2009 with the largest rate of initiation in the past 5 years (2011-2016).

In our European dataset, 64.3% of programs were established between 2008 and 2016 when the share of migrant and refugee populations peaked. In the American sample, there were jumps in the establishment of programs during the early and late 1990s, after which the distribution is relatively even ( $SD = 25.4$  years). The European dataset is left-skewed showing growth in step with immigration and refugee arrivals ( $SD = 12.6$  years).

### Age Range of Services Provided

Most of the programs in the U.S. sample serve youth between 11 to 18 years old. Programs that target mentees older than 18 are rare in the U.S. sample (1.7%), and more frequent in the European dataset (41.1%) (see Figure 2).



**Table 1.** Main Characteristics of Mentoring Programs in the United States and Continental Europe.

	The United States	Continental Europe <sup>a</sup>
<b>Target population</b>		
Children and youth at risk (general) <sup>b</sup>	41 (62.1%)	27 (54%)
Homeless or incarcerated youth <sup>c</sup>	3 (4.5%)	—
Children of incarcerated parents <sup>c</sup>	4 (6.1%)	—
Racial/ethnic minority youth <sup>c</sup>	2 (3.0%)	—
Immigrant children and youth <sup>c***</sup>	—	12 (24%)
Immigrant adults <sup>c**</sup>	—	4 (8%)
Refugee children and youth <sup>c</sup>	—	3 (6%)
Refugee adults <sup>c*</sup>	—	4 (8%)
Gender specific <sup>c</sup>	3 (4.5%)	—
General population <sup>c***</sup>	12 (18.2%)	—
Total	65	50
<b>Type of mentors</b>		
College students <sup>b*</sup>	5 (7.6%)	12 (24%)
Adults in general <sup>b**</sup>	49 (74.2%)	23 (46%)
Business or professional mentors <sup>b*</sup>	5 (7.6%)	13 (26%)
Adults with a college degree <sup>c</sup>	5 (7.6%)	—
Elder <sup>c</sup>	1 (1.5)	2 (4%)
Total	65	50
<b>Type of programs</b>		
Community-based mentoring <sup>b***</sup>	26 (39.4%)	46 (92%)
School-based mentoring <sup>c**</sup>	19 (28.8%)	4 (8%)
Work-place mentoring <sup>c</sup>	2 (3%)	—
After-school mentoring <sup>c</sup>	5 (7.6%)	—
Agency-site mentoring <sup>c**</sup>	8 (12.1%)	—
Faith-based mentoring <sup>c</sup>	2 (3%)	—
Other <sup>c</sup>	4 (6.1%)	—
Total	66	50

Source. Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring database.

<sup>a</sup>Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

<sup>b</sup>Compared using Chi-Square Test of Independence.

<sup>c</sup>Compared using Fisher's Exact Test.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

### Program Characteristics

The main characteristics of mentoring programs in both contexts are shown in Table 1. European programs tended to target immigrant and refugee populations

(46%) when reaching youth living in neighborhoods with a high density of foreign-born population. The vast majority of programs in the U.S. sample targeted general risk and commonly used the designation of youth “at-risk,” many of whom are youth of color (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013).

Although some U.S. programs (4.4%) targeted college-student mentors, most targeted adults in general (74%). In the European dataset, while 40% of the programs approached adults in general, nearly a quarter of programs in the sample utilized college students as mentors (24%). In fact, as most of these programs were also the largest in the number of mentoring pairs they facilitated, they accounted for more than half of mentors (51.2%) in the European dataset.

Perhaps due to its lengthier history of mentoring, American mentoring programs were implemented in a broader diversity of locations than in Europe. While community-based mentoring was the most common type of program (39.4%) in the United States, other forms of mentoring, such as primary or secondary school-based (28.8%) and agency site-based mentoring (12.1%), were also common. In Europe, the vast majority of programs were considered to be community-based mentoring (92%), while only a few of them were primary or secondary school-based (8%). This is largely in keeping with the more strictly academic conceptualization of the role of schools and universities in the European setting.

The analyses also showed marginally ( $p = .06$ ) more than half of the U.S. programs (52%) were focused on mitigation rather than inclusion or positive development of mentees. Programs in the European dataset, on the contrary, more strongly emphasized inclusion (66%). Finally, the majority (60%) of the programs in the European data set viewed mentoring as having bi-directional benefits compared with just 12.1% in the United States (see Table 2).

## Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore how the approaches of mentoring programs align and diverge across the United State and continental Europe. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore how cultural and socio-demographic trends may shape program characteristics and approaches.

Our analyses suggest that, although immigration has long been a defining feature of the United States, immigrant and refugee youth have rarely been designated as the constituents of mentoring organizations and few immigrant-focused programs have been evaluated (Oberoi, 2016). Instead, most programs have focused on addressing the needs of economically disadvantaged youth in low-resource communities to mitigate problems and foster positive outcomes.

In Europe, mentoring appears to be more commonly perceived as a tool for the social inclusion of migrants and refugees and as a bidirectional tool for the development of intercultural competence (Prieto-Flores, Feu, &

**Table 2.** Programmatic Approach of Mentoring Programs.

	The United States	Continental Europe <sup>a</sup>
<b>Program approach</b>		
Mitigation <sup>b</sup>	33 (52%)	17 (34%)
Inclusion <sup>b</sup>	31 (48%)	33 (66%)
Total	64	50
<b>Language emphasis</b>		
Yes <sup>c***</sup>	—	16 (32%)
No <sup>b***</sup>	66 (100%)	34 (68%)
Total	66	50
<b>Directionality of mentoring benefits</b>		
Unidirectional <sup>b***</sup>	57 (86.4%)	20 (40%)
Bidirectional <sup>b***</sup>	8 (12.1%)	30 (60%)
Total	65	50

Source. Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring database.

<sup>a</sup>Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

<sup>b</sup>Compared using Chi-Square Test of Independence.

<sup>c</sup>Compared using Fisher's Exact Test.

\*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Casademont, 2016). In this context, programs have been developed or funded through a variety of government departments, emphasizing migration and refugees among the most common entities. European programs in our sample placed significantly more emphasis on language acquisition, highlighting the interplay between language, culture, and national identity in determining who “belongs” in that society (Alba & Foner, 2015).

Furthermore, European mentoring programs in our sample targeted older youth, with program support extending well past the age of 18. This may be explained, in part, by the different ways in which adulthood is conceptualized in each context and the existing logic behind funding. For example, in the United States, major grants provided by Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) allocate funds for population younger than 18 years old (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). This contrasts with the European context where the term “youth” is defined as anyone between the ages of 13 and 29 (European Commission, 2015) and funding schemes are not so restrictive with regard to age. The seeming absence of references to parents in European mentoring programs included in this study may be impacted by the older age of the mentees in these programs. Future cross-cultural mentoring research could further examine the role of parents within the mentoring relationship as a rich vein of insight (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2017).

Another distinction European programs in our sample demonstrated in their mentoring approach is the explicit emphasis on the bidirectionality of mentoring benefits, particularly with regard to youth mentoring's potential to promote intercultural understanding and friendships. For example, the qualitative data collected from many European mentoring programs in our study stated that the program would provide (inter)cultural competence, reduce isolation of elderly mentors, and other benefits. As noted, many mentors in the European data set are college students, where programs might be influenced by the ethos of service learning and professional development in an increasingly diverse workforce (Nilsson, 2003). This bidirectional approach is present, however, even in those mentoring programs not specifically oriented toward recruiting college students as mentors.

While U.S. programs in the sample tended to recruit mostly adults as mentors, European programs tended to focus more on college students and older youth. More generally, while the typical mentor in the United States is a working adult (Raposa et al., 2017), in Europe, the typical mentor appeared to be college students or older youth. As noted, the most well-established European mentoring programs have been developed through universities or non-profit organizations that have agreements that engage students in service learning activities. Consistent with our expectations, there were marginally significant differences in the primary focus of American (mitigation) versus European (social inclusion) programs.

The present study demonstrated that mentoring reflects the goals and values of the societies in which it is implemented. These findings have several implications for the field of formal mentoring and potential avenues for future research. First, it highlights that the lessons learned through American research may not generalize fully to different cultural contexts. For example, factors that have been identified as helping to promote successful formal mentoring programs for youth in the United States (e.g., *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*; Garringer, Kupersmidt, Rhodes, Stelter, & Tai, 2015) may need to be reevaluated or supplemented to account for programs operating in different cultural contexts. Still, while keeping in mind that there are limits to applicability, given their propensity for focusing on recruiting college students as mentors and workplace preparation, European mentoring programs may benefit from using the research that has been conducted in the United States on mentoring in higher education and professional workplaces as a touchstone (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008).

Conversely, the findings in this research also hint at the opportunity to conduct further research into cross-cultural "common factors" that undergird successful youth mentoring relationships. The term "common factors" is often used in the context of psychotherapeutic intervention, and refers to a set

of implicit constructs which are shared between diverse approaches that drive the success of an intervention (Rosenzweig, 1936). Applying this concept to youth mentoring, it is possible these common factors could foster positive mentoring outcomes which persist across cultures and contexts.

Although our study suggests interesting findings, several limitations should be considered. Prominently, the sample of programs selected is not representative of youth mentoring programs in the United States or Europe as a whole. To draw comparisons and contrasts between mentoring in the two contexts, a dataset of more than 100 mentoring programs was created. Given the rate of turnover in U.S. mentoring programs (Garringer, McQuillen, & McDaniel, 2017), we oversampled for more established programs, which may have skewed the sample in ways that affected our results. It is not our intent, however, to make sweeping claims about *all* mentoring programs in both contexts, but to identify trends appearing in a diverse subsample of programs. Likewise, because this is a cross-sectional study, we are unable to draw conclusions regarding causal relationships among the variables.

Despite these limitations, the present study lays the foundation for a critical review of the underlying aims of mentoring by examining the manner in which programs are conceptually oriented and how they view mentoring as a vehicle to improve the lives of others. It is hoped that such comparisons can spark further inquiry into how cultural factors shape our approaches to addressing the needs of today's youth.

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**Jean E. Rhodes** is a professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She has devoted her career to understanding the role of both natural and assigned adult-youth relationships in the lives of disadvantaged youth.