



Being trusted: The perspectives of trusted adults about engaging with young people



Ariella Meltzer^{a,b,*}, Kristy Muir^a, Lyn Craig^b

^a Centre for Social Impact, Suite 16.01, Level 16, 6 O'Connell St, Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia

^b Social Policy Research Centre, John Goodsell Building, University of New South Wales, Kensington, NSW 2052, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Trusted adults outside the home often play an important role in young people's lives, providing motivational, emotional and practical support as young people navigate the social and economic transitions of young adulthood. Their support is developmentally appropriate as they often treat young people as adults, as they are guiding them towards that status. Yet knowledge of trusted adult relationships is largely drawn from the perspectives of young people. How do trusted adults themselves experience the relationship?

Drawing on a broader study of young people's social and economic engagement during adolescence to adulthood, this paper explores the perspectives of 23 trusted adults, including those in family/friend, paid professional and community roles. It looks at how trusted adults' accounts of the relationship compare with young people's accounts. It examines some subtleties trusted adults experience in the relationship, related to their perception of their role and the roles of others, the impermanence of the relationship and personal–professional boundaries. It draws policy and practice implications regarding how to support both trusted adults and young people in the relationships they share.

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1. Introduction

Young adulthood is a complex life stage, during which young people develop in their education, work, relationships and worldviews (Arnett, 2000) whilst beginning to move away from some key childhood supports, such as parents (Aquilino, 2006; Chan & Chan, 2013). Young people commonly extend their identifications and connections (Worth, 2009) and seek belonging outside their immediate families (Oliver & Cheff, 2012). Past research has highlighted that as young people extend their connections in this way, many form relationships with trusted adults from within their broader families and communities and that these adults may be important sources of guidance and/or support during this formative time of their lives.

A number of characteristics are useful in defining who trusted adults are. Firstly, they are adults who appear to young people as reliable, competent, honest and open; adults who young people are willing to be vulnerable with or to risk relying on, and whom they believe will protect their wellbeing (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Secondly, trusted adults are also called 'non-parental adults' (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Ahrens et al., 2011). They may be extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles or older cousins or they

may be teachers, parents of friends, family friends or neighbours, or service providers, coaches or tutors (Galbo, 1986; Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992; Scales & Gibbons, 1996; Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003).

Finally, trusted adults differ from formal mentors, but have commonly been identified as 'natural mentors' (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Dang & Miller, 2013) or 'informal mentors' (McDonald, Erickson, Johnson, & Elder, 2007). That is, trusted adults are not adults who have been assigned to young people for a formal mentoring purpose, but rather they are adults who young people have independently chosen to trust and with whom they develop a natural rapport or form of informal mentorship (Dang & Miller, 2013; Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Importantly, trusted adults may have a formal role with young people (e.g. as a teacher or youth worker), but they are not appointed formally into the role of a 'mentor'.

Trusted adults may come to play important roles in many young people's lives. A range of qualitative and quantitative research has shown that their support can be motivational, emotional and practical (Hendry et al., 1992; Beam et al., 2002; Chen, Greenberger, Farruggia, Bush, & Dong, 2003) and can encompass education, transitions to work, finances, emotional or mental health issues and role modelling the decision-making, actions and behaviour of adult life (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; McDonald et al., 2007; Ahrens et al., 2011; Torres, Harper, Sánchez, & Fernández, 2012). Their impact is significant, with both small and large-scale quantitative studies showing that young people who have a relationship with a

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: a.meltzer@unsw.edu.au (A. Meltzer), k.muir@unsw.edu.au (K. Muir), l.craig@unsw.edu.au (L. Craig).

trusted adult are more likely to be engaged and progressing in their education (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005, Farruggia, Bullen, & Davidson, 2012), work (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005, McDonald et al., 2007), aspirations (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005) and health, confidence and wellbeing (Cotterell, 1992; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). Moreover, qualitative research has shown that where young people are disengaged from education or work, or at risk of disengaging, trusted adults may have a key role in reversing their circumstances of disadvantage (Meltzer et al., forthcoming 2016).

In addition, trusted adults offer support that is appropriate to young people's life-stage. Qualitative studies have highlighted that trusted adults have a low-key, direct (but not directive) and equitable manner that allows a young person to feel like an equal adult, even whilst the adult may still be guiding him or her towards that status (Meltzer et al., forthcoming 2016, Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008, Ahrens et al., 2011; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010). In this sense, the trusted adult relationship is suited to the developmental needs of young adulthood, where young people need support and guidance but also want to feel like they are maturing (Meltzer et al., forthcoming 2016).

However, while the literature has identified the benefits of such relationships to young people, much less is known about the experience of trusted adults themselves. Most qualitative literature on trusted adults with the capacity to explore experiential perspectives only covers the perspectives of young people (Spencer, Jordan, & Szama, 2004, Liang et al., 2008; Munson et al., 2010; Ahrens et al., 2011; Dang & Miller, 2013, Meltzer et al., forthcoming 2016). While the experiences of formal mentors have been researched from their own perspective (for example, highlighting the cultural capital that formal mentors may gain (Philip & Hendry, 2000), interpersonal and leadership skills they may learn (Rekha & Ganesh, 2012) and the hard work, strategy and challenges that may be involved (Augustine, 2014)), this may or may not be the experience of trusted adults who are in a more informal relationship with young people. This leaves an important gap in the literature.

The perspectives of trusted adults are necessary to understand how they navigate their relationships with young people. Other research raises questions about trusted adults' experiences. For example, one study of young people's views questioned whether parents feel that the involvement of trusted adults threatened their autonomy and this raises a question about how trusted adults deal with sharing the support role with parents (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002). Research from youth work also highlights the complexity of maintaining personal-professional boundaries (Walker & Larson, 2006, Noble-Carr, Barker, McArthur, & Woodman, 2014, Sercombe, 2007) and of managing relationships with young people in the context of staff turnover and organisational change (Rodd & Stewart, 2009, Noble-Carr et al., 2014). This prompts questions about the context and constraints within which the trusted adult relationship exists, particularly for those who also have a paid role with young people (e.g. as a teacher or youth worker). Developing a deeper understanding of these issues from the perspective of trusted adults is important for fostering an environment in which their relationships can flourish and be beneficial for both parties.

To begin exploring these issues, this paper draws on the accounts of 23 trusted adults included in a broader study investigating young people's social and economic engagement. The paper asks how trusted adults perceive and experience their relationships with the young people who trust them, comparing their views to a previous analysis of young people's perspectives from the same study (Meltzer et al., forthcoming 2016). The paper explores the differences between trusted adults who also have paid professional roles with young people compared to those who are family/friends or from community roles, and it examines the influence of the young person's level of educational/employment engagement on the relationship. It concludes with policy and practice implications about the trusted adult relationship, particularly about how to support young people when the relationship is subject to change and/or complex systemic conditions.

2. Methods

This paper draws on an Australian Research Council Linkage Project entitled '*We can't afford not to: Supporting young people within their families and communities from early adolescence to early adulthood*'. Conducted longitudinally in six sites around Australia (including urban, regional and rural communities), the study includes the perspectives of young people and, where young people consented, parents and trusted adults about how young people negotiate social and economic engagement from adolescence to early adulthood. The study was structured to interview each person once a year for three years.

One-hundred and three young people were interviewed throughout the study. They were recruited from local councils, youth services and re-engagement programmes for young people experiencing difficulty with engagement in education/employment. Young people took part for either one, two or three years, depending on continued consent, attrition and additional recruitment. They were asked about their perceptions of and participation in education, work, community and their activities and interests outside of school and work, as well as relationships with family and friends.

Young people were asked to nominate a trusted adult to take part in the study – someone other than their parents who they considered to be "important in [their] life" and who "knows [them] well and who [they] feel [they] could talk to for support". Young people did not *have* to nominate a trusted adult to participate, but a subset chose to. The young person sought the permission of the adult to pass on their contact details to the research team and, where the adult agreed, the researcher contacted the adult. Trusted adults were then asked if they wished to participate in the study. Where they consented, they were included in one to three interviews, depending on when they joined the study and on whether both the adult and the young person continued to consent to their participation. Twenty-three trusted adults chose to participate across the three years of the study. This article draws on only the first interview with each adult.

The trusted adults were asked about young people's education, work, other activities and interests, sense of community and relationships with family and friends. They were prompted to comment on their perceptions of how these domains were going for the young person and about their own involvement in supporting the young person in them. The trusted adults were also asked to describe how they came to know and support the young person and how they felt they acted in the relationship. The thematic framework for analysis – conducted using NVivo 10¹ – first focused on these themes, as well as specific codes to understand how and why trusted adults helped and what the impact of the relationship was on young people. A second round of analysis then inductively looked for themes regarding how trusted adults felt the relationship was enacted, how they assessed its significance and what difficulties they had in the relationship. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

2.1. Sample

One hundred and three young people participated across the three years of the study. Forty-five (43.7%) identified as female, 57 (55.3%) identified as male and one (0.9%) identified as transgender. Ages ranged from 12 to 22 years; the average was 16.5 years. Seventeen (16.5%) young people identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Twenty-four (23.4%) were not born in Australia and 27 (26.2%) spoke a language other than English in their home. In reporting young people's perspectives, this article however draws on a previous paper by the authors which used only the accounts of the 70 young people who participated in the first year of the study (Meltzer et al., forthcoming 2016). Forty-eight of these 70 young people identified as

¹ Details of how NVivo can be used to conduct qualitative analysis are available in Bazeley and Jackson (2002).

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