



A pilot study of big brothers big sisters programs and youth development: An application of critical race theory☆



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ABSTRACT

Testing critical race theory, we examined whether children and adolescents with an adult mentor of the same race/ethnicity display higher levels of confidence, competence, and caring than those with a mentor of a different race/ethnicity. We also tested whether longer participation in the mentoring program results in better developmental outcomes. The sample included 47 cross- and same-race mentor-mentee pairs in the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program. Developmental outcomes were measured using Big Brothers Big Sisters of America's (BBBSA) Program-based Outcome Evaluation, and were analyzed using t-test, chi-square, and General Linear Model. No significant differences were found in youth development based on racial/ethnic match. However, the longer matched pairs showed greater competence. Implications for practice, policies, and research are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Empirical findings have revealed that parental support is an important factor in youth socio-emotional development (Brody, Murry, Kim, & Brown, 2002; Brody et al., 2006), academic achievement (Henry, Plunkett, & Sands, 2011; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004), and vocational outcomes (Diemer, 2007), especially for racial/ethnic minority youth. When parents are unable to provide support, however, other adults can be a critical source of social support (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002). Non-parental adult figures such as teachers or mentors are a particularly important source of social support, mentoring, and guidance for at-risk youth whose parents are absent or uninvolved. Many youth mentoring programs have been developed to address the needs of adolescents, particularly adolescents from low-income, single-parent families in a high risk environment. Although a variety of programs exist and the content varies, a common feature is a one-on-one relationship with a supportive and caring adult (De Wit et al., 2007). The role of mentoring programs in positive youth development has been widely recognized (Bauldry & Hartman, 2003), and given the

growing number of low-income, single-parent households, such programs have emerged as an important youth service.

Several empirical and meta-analytic studies have examined the effectiveness of such programs and have consistently found significant associations between youth mentoring and positive youth outcomes, such as improved relationships with peers and families (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; DuBois & Neville, 1998; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002a; Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002; Jekielek et al., 2002; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Tierney & Grossman, 1995) and greater levels of self-confidence and prosocial behavior (De Wit et al., 2007; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002). Mentored youth are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as substance misuse and fighting, and are more likely to do well in school (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; LoSciuto, Rajala, Townsend, & Taylor, 1996; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). A large, random-assignment evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentoring program by Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, and McMaken (2007) found that youth who had mentoring relationships with caring adults reported significant improvements in their academic performance, school behavior, and attendance by the end of the school year, compared to non-mentored youth.

1.1. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is a non-profit agency that provides an array of services to at-risk children aged 5 to 15 who

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come from economically disadvantaged and/or single-parent households. BBBSA targets multiple areas of risk, including social risks, such as exposure to illegal drugs, alcohol use, behavioral problems, and low self-esteem; academic risks, such as low academic performance and low attendance; and emotional risks (Tierney et al., 2000). Based on a fundamental principle that society should not abandon children during a critical period of cognitive, social, and emotional development, BBBSA encourages youth interaction with peers, teachers, and neighbors, and promotes positive relationships between adult volunteer mentors and child mentees (Tierney et al., 2000). The goal of BBBSA is to provide positive role models to help youth living in poverty cope with peer pressures, make them think through the consequences of their actions, and encourage them to become involved in socially acceptable activities. Mentoring by BBBSA volunteers can also help prevent participants from engaging in misbehaviors (Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

BBBSA identifies three objectives of its programming: to help participants develop self-competence; to encourage them to perform better in school activities; and to facilitate the building of positive relationships with peers, family, and other adults. BBBSA stipulates that mentors and staff promote positive development of the mentees (An Initiative of the Nationwide Leadership Council, 2007). Fundamentally, BBBSA is guided by two theories: social cognitive and social support theories (Abbot, Meredith, Self-Kelly, & Davis, 1997). Social cognitive theory emphasizes human adaptation and change through the reciprocal causal model, in which environmental influences, behaviors, cognitive, biological, and other personal factors operate as active determinants that modify each other (Bandura, 1996). BBBSA applies this theoretical framework to their program by emphasizing the importance of interrelations between mentors (as role models) and mentees (as observers) (Abbot et al., 1997). Social support theory suggests that social supports from families, friends, professionals, or other social organizations are critical in assisting disadvantaged individuals or families to cope with stress (Abbot et al., 1997). Thus, the BBBSA program conceptualizes the mentor-mentee relationships as social support that promotes positive youth development.

In matching adult volunteers with children, BBBSA asks for a time commitment of at least one year for both mentors and mentees and engagement in various activities multiple times per month. Each agency screens volunteers, performs background checks, trains volunteers and youth, and supervises relationships and activities. These guidelines aim to facilitate positive relationships and optimize the well-being of participating youth (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). BBBS consists of a community-based program (CBP) and a school-based program (SBP). CBP activities such as sports, games, and watching movies are activities that mentor/mentee pairs can do together within the community (e.g., library or park). Volunteers meet with their mentees at least twice per month for approximately two hours (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). SBP activities are school-related and held during school hours in a specific location within the school site, where the mentor and mentee work on homework assignments or play sports together. The mentors interact with their mentees for at least one hour per week (Portwood, Ayers, Kinnison, Waris, & Wise, 2005).

The BBBS local agency holds an orientation for volunteer mentors in the initial phase prior to matching mentors with mentees in order to provide specific information about BBBS, such as program options, services, benefits, rules and expectation, as well as characteristics of potential agency mentees (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County, 2008). During the orientation, staff members hold interviews with volunteers to inquire about their psychosocial history and their suitability for mentoring children (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County, 2008).

The agency also asks the volunteers to provide three letters of reference that include the volunteer's characteristics and prior experiences working with youth (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County, 2008). In addition, the agency carefully checks the volunteers' background records through criminal background checks, home environment,

central registry clearance, and driving record. Agency staff members select mentors based on the following two criteria: qualification and mentees' decision (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County, 2008). Once a match has been determined, an agency staff member provides ongoing support for the mentoring relationship by conducting a monthly call to the mentor, mentee, and mentee's parent/guardian for the remainder of the match year (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Washtenaw County, 2008).

1.2. Same-race versus cross-race/ethnic match

1.2.1. Same-racial/ethnic match

Many youth mentoring programs attempt to match children with mentors of the same racial background (Sánchez & Colón, 2005) to facilitate stronger connections between racial minority children and their mentors (Liang & Grossman, 2008; Sánchez & Colón, 2005). Both Byrne and Ogbu theorized that pairing mentees with mentors of the same race and cultural background is more likely to lead to positive youth outcomes than pairing mentors and mentees of different racial and cultural backgrounds (as cited in Sánchez & Colón, 2005). It has been argued that adults of the same racial backgrounds are more capable of guiding youth in coping with the social barriers and stereotypes they are likely to encounter than are adults from a different background. Zancks and Madhubuti also suggested that minority mentors of the same racial background are likely to display more empathy and provide more realistic coping strategies, particularly when their mentees experience racial discrimination and other social barriers (as cited in Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, 2002b). A study conducted by Kalbfleisch and Davies (1991), which consisted of 56 mentors and 67 mentees of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, found that African American mentees displayed a stronger connection with African American mentors than with White mentors. Linnehan, Weer, and Uhl (2005) also found that African American children with strong racial identities displayed greater trust toward their African American mentors than toward White mentors. Interestingly, African American children with weak racial identities were more likely to have stronger relationship with White mentors than with African American mentors. Wyatt's (2000) research on upper elementary and high school students in the Chicago Public School System also suggested that African American adolescent boys in same-racial/ethnic match mentoring programs displayed higher levels of self-concept than did those in cross-racial/ethnic match programs. Researchers also found that African American male mentors were important resources for at-risk African American youth in understanding the importance of mutual cooperation, mutual respect, family commitment, racial identity, and community responsibility (Ghee, 1990; Holland, 1996). Santos and Reigadas (2002) reported a similar pattern among college-aged Latino youth from a sample of 32 students participating in a mentoring program with university faculty. Participants in the study perceived Latino mentors as more helpful in greater their psychosocial and career development than mentors of other ethnicities. They also reported satisfaction with Latino mentors than non-Latino mentors.

1.2.2. Cross-racial/ethnic match

A number of researchers have questioned whether mentor-mentee match based on race is a significant factor in positive mentoring outcomes among minority youth. Several empirical studies suggest that mentor training, bonds between mentors and mentees, and openness to cultural diversity are more significant than the matching of racial identities of mentor and mentee (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pubh-Lilly, 2002b; Rhodes et al., 2002b). Rhodes et al. (2002b) reported that cross-race mentor-mentee relationships in their study had longer durations than same-racial/ethnic matches. The researchers also found that White mentors were more available to their mentees, which positively affected their relationship. Although children in both types of matches had similar feelings about their mentors, mentees in a cross-racial/

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