



Youth mentoring relationships in context: Mentor perceptions of youth, environment, and the mentor role



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ABSTRACT

Youth mentoring is primarily understood as a relationship between mentor and mentee, yet mentors often enter into home, school, and other community settings associated with youth they serve, and interact regularly with other people in mentees' lives. Understanding how and why mentors negotiate their role as they do remains underexplored, especially in relation to these environmental elements. This qualitative study drew on structured interviews conducted with professional mentors ($N = 9$) serving youth at risk for adjustment problems to examine how mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentee environments informed their sense of how they fulfilled the mentoring role. Mentors commonly characterized problems youth displayed as byproducts of adverse environments, and individual-level strengths as existing "in spite of" environmental inputs. Perceptions of mentees and their environments informed mentors' role conceptualizations, with some mentors seeing themselves as antidotes to environmental adversity. Mentors described putting significant time and effort into working closely with other key individuals as well as one-on-one with mentees because they identified considerable environmental need; however, extra-dyadic facets of their roles were far less clearly defined or supported. They described challenges associated with role overload and opaque role boundaries, feeling unsupported by other adults in mentees' lives, and frustrated by the prevalence of risks. Community-based mentoring represents a unique opportunity to connect with families, but mentors must be supported around the elements of their roles that extend beyond mentor–mentee relationships in order to capitalize more fully on the promise of the intervention.

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1. Introduction

Youth mentoring is broadly defined as an individualized, supportive relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult that promotes positive development (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Keller & Pryce, 2010), but mentors are also members of mentees' social networks, and many interact with other members of these networks (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013). Great within-program variability in mentoring practices and intervention effectiveness (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011) may be fueled in part by the high level of discretion and latitude allowed mentors in order to insure that mentoring is responsive to each child's needs, strengths, and interests. This means that mentors' perceptions of the youth they serve can dramatically inform the shape their mentoring takes. Although a growing literature considers the complexity of the mentoring role (e.g.,

Goldner & Maysless, 2008; Keller & Pryce, 2010; Morrow & Styles, 1995), understanding how and why mentors negotiate their role as they do remains little explored or understood.

The current study builds on a prior study (Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014) examining the conceptualizations of "professional" youth mentors (mentors serving in a long-term full-time salaried capacity) who worked with rosters of youth perceived to be at heightened risk for adjustment problems and negative life outcomes. In that study, we focused on how serving in a professional capacity affected how mentors conceptualized their role, as well as how they viewed the program model and organizational structure. The current study used the same set of interview transcripts to examine mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentee environments, and their descriptions of the mentoring role in light of these youth and environment-related conceptualizations.

1.1. Mentor perceptions and role fulfillment

Given its inherent flexibility, mentors' perceptions of the role they fulfill can affect the course and outcome of the intervention in many

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ways. Mentors have reported that their decisions to terminate relationships after a short time have stemmed from the gap between their expectations and subsequent experiences (Spencer, 2007). Morrow and Styles (1995) demonstrated that dissimilar mentoring approaches within one program were differentially associated with youth and mentor relationship satisfaction as well as relationship length.

Mentors' perceptions of their mentees can also influence their mentoring approach. Drawing on concepts of social expectancies and self-fulfilling prophecies in a study of a school-based mentoring program, Karcher, Davidson, Rhodes, and Herrera (2010) found that academically disconnected mentees partnered with older teen mentors who reported more positive attitudes toward youth were more emotionally engaged in their mentoring relationships, and ultimately developed stronger relationships with their teachers, than disconnected mentees with more negative mentors. Herrera, DuBois, and Grossman (2013) found that mentors matched with youth with relatively high levels of individual and environmental-level risks engaged in activities targeting character/behavior change (e.g., developing social skills) more often than mentors matched with mentees with lower risk profiles. Mentors matched with these highest risk youth were also least likely to solicit input from their mentees about activities.

In combination, this body of evidence suggests that the choices mentors make in response to their perceptions of their mentees can have tangible consequences on relationships and youth outcomes. Given that mentors have such latitude in crafting their mentoring approach, and that perceptions and approaches can meaningfully influence outcomes, examining the phenomenology of mentoring can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of mentoring program effects.

1.2. Mentoring relationships in context

Though the growth of the field and proliferation of program models has expanded the number and characteristics of youth receiving mentoring, formal mentoring programs most often target youth living in areas characterized by a relative lack of organizational and institutional resources, and by the presence of considerable community-level risk (DuBois et al., 2011). Stressors associated with poverty – for example, unstable housing, employment, and family composition; stressful life events and daily hassles; and increased exposure to crime and violence – place children at increased risk for behavioral, emotional, and academic struggles (Borofsky, Kellerman, Baucom, Oliver, & Margolin, 2013; McCoy, Roy, & Sirkman, 2013; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003). Youth facing these stressors who become involved in mentoring relationships may exhibit behaviors or needs that mentors find challenging or frustrating; mentors matched with youth at relatively high individual-level risk have indeed reported greater difficulty dealing with behavior and concerns related to youths' social and emotional issues (Herrera et al., 2013). With so many children assigned to mentoring programs precisely because they present with heightened risk profiles that may negatively impact on relationship-building, examining how mentors describe the strategies they employ and the perceptions they hold regarding their relationships with youth who demonstrate these risks may elicit better understanding of factors associated with relationship quality with children with whom it may be challenging to work.

1.3. Mentors' involvement with contextual factors

Mentors may also face unique challenges posed by mentees' homes, schools, and communities. In Herrera et al.'s (2013) study, mentors working with youth with heightened environmental risks noted difficulties connecting with and getting support from youths' families, meeting with youth consistently, and navigating social service systems. Older adults mentoring high-risk youth identified mentees' difficult life circumstances, fear of youths' neighborhoods, and the challenge of balancing mentors' relationships with youth and their families as salient

stressors (Rogers & Taylor, 1997). Mentors involved in failed relationships described feeling overwhelmed by the difficult circumstances faced by youth and their families (Spencer, 2007). Further, some professional mentors who worked with youth in schools described challenges related to feeling "pressured" by some parents to serve as quasi-parents themselves, while others sensed that some parents felt threatened by their relationships with youth (Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006). Because of the significant challenges associated with working with families, some researchers and practitioners have adopted a view that the interaction between mentors parents and families, and family involvement in mentoring relationships, should be limited (Miller, 2007; Morrow & Styles, 1995).

Environmental factors, however, are not always and only risk factors for youth or barriers to mentoring. Keller (2005) emphasizes that parents play a critical role in the mentoring process. His "Systems Theory of Mentoring" (2005) highlights the importance of including key individuals beyond the mentor and mentee in a mentoring intervention, such as parents and caseworkers. Keller and Blakeslee (2013) introduce social network theory as a valuable lens for examining the effects of mentoring beyond the dyad and illustrate the web of relationships that can develop within the context of a mentor–mentee pairing, including between mentors and parents, school personnel, and community members. Parents have described expending considerable effort to nurture their children's mentor–mentee relationships (Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011), and staff members from mentoring programs with explicit family engagement strategies have said parental involvement is critical to the success of mentoring matches (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). DuBois et al. (2002) found stronger positive outcomes for youth involved in programs with a parent involvement component, and Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch (2000) found that improvements in parent–child relationships partially mediated the association between mentoring and a number of positive youth outcomes, including global self-worth, school value, and grades. These findings indicate that parents and other key individuals in mentees' lives may make unique and critical contributions to the youth mentoring endeavor, even when risks or challenges are also present.

As Spencer and Basualdo-Delmonico (2014) have noted, the trend in youth mentoring to focus exclusively on the mentor–mentee relationship is in contrast to considerable evidence for positive effects of involving families as co-interventionists and addressing the needs of both children and families in intervention and prevention programs for high-risk children and youth (Cappella, Frazier, Atkins, Schoenwald, & Glisson, 2008; Farahmand et al., 2012; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003, as cited in Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). More broadly, the value of parent involvement toward improved child outcomes has been established across service modalities, from clinic-based psychotherapy (Dowell & Ogles, 2010) to schooling (Fantuzzo, Davis, & Ginsburg, 1995; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005). For children from challenging environments, however, the importance of attending to contextual factors may be heightened. For example, a meta-analysis of community-based mental health and behavioral programs for low-income urban youth (Farahmand et al., 2012) found the strongest effects for programs that were environmentally based, and nonsignificant effects for programs that did not target the environment.

In parallel with Farahmand et al.'s (2012) findings, Taylor and Porcellini (2013) hypothesize that it may be precisely when youth experience challenging family or community environments that mentoring alone, isolated from children's larger ecological issues, does not achieve optimal effects. Given this potential, it is unfortunate that there are few studies that go beyond the dyadic interpersonal relationship between mentor and mentee to examine other important dynamics, such as mentors' perspectives regarding their relationships with other adults in their mentees' lives as well as other community influences. A related and equally unexplored area is how mentors' interpretation and negotiation of their mentees' environments may relate to

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