An Exploratory Study of Youth Mentoring in an Urban Context: Adolescents’ Perceptions of Relationship Styles

Regina Day Langhout,1 Jean E. Rhodes,2 and Lori N. Osborne3

Received January 30, 2003; revised April 17, 2003; accepted June 25, 2003

The goal of this study was to empirically distinguish a range of mentor relationships and to evaluate their differential influence on adolescent outcomes. The study makes use of data that were collected as part of a national evaluation of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America. The evaluation included 1138 youth, ranging in age from 10 through 16 (M = 12.25), who were assigned randomly to either a mentoring relationship or a control group and followed for 18 months. A series of analyses, based on the matched youth’s accounts of the relationships, suggested 4 distinct types of relationships (i.e., moderate, unconditionally supportive, active, and low-key). The 4 groups tended to distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of perceived support, structure, and activity. Relative to the controls, youth who characterized their mentor relationships as providing moderate levels of both activity and structure and conditional support derived the largest number of benefits from the relationships. These included improvements in social, psychological, and academic outcomes. Implications of the findings for research and intervention are discussed.

KEY WORDS: youth mentoring; mentoring relationship styles.

Volunteer mentoring programs have been advocated increasingly in such diverse areas as welfare reform, education, violence prevention, school-to-work transition, and national service (Freedman, 1993; Rhodes, 2002). Approximately 2.5 million youth are involved in mentoring programs, including more than 10,000 matches in Big Brothers/Big Sisters nationwide (Rhodes, 2002). Evaluations of volunteer mentoring, paraprofessional, and volunteer programs provide evidence of positive outcomes, including improvements in youth’s self-concept and academic achievement (Linnehan, 2001; McPartland and Nettles, 1991), lower recidivism rates among juvenile delinquents (Davidson et al., 1987), and reductions in substance abuse (Aseltine et al., 2000; LoSciuto et al., 1996).

Additional evidence for the effectiveness of mentoring was provided by an impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters (Grossman and Tierney, 1998). Control youth were placed on a waiting list for 18 months and the experimental group youth were matched with mentors. The 2 groups were compared on a number of outcomes. Relative to control youth, matched participants reported skipping fewer days of school, lower levels of substance initiation and use, less physical aggression, higher scholastic competence, attendance, and grades. In addition to these behavioral and academic outcomes, mentoring relationships were associated with improvements in the youth’s relationships with their parents and peers.

The results reported by Grossman and Tierney (1998) are consistent with results from a recent meta-analysis. DuBois et al. (2002) examined over 55 empirical studies...
of mentoring programs. Their findings indicate that there is a small but significant positive effect for mentees in the areas of enhanced psychological, social, academic, and job/employment functioning, as well as reductions in problem behaviors.

Although the findings provide evidence for the efficacy of mentoring interventions on a broad range of outcome variables, basic questions remain regarding the nature of the relationships. In particular, additional information is needed regarding the ways in which variations in mentors’ stances affect different youth outcomes. Few studies, however, have tracked associations between youth and volunteers. Indeed, DuBois et al. (2002) were unable to reliably analyze relationship characteristics because of the lack of reported data.

Yet, it is possible to turn to a few studies that do discuss relational characteristics. Davidson and colleagues (Davidson et al., 1987; Mitchell et al., 1980), for example, observed associations between the strategies adopted by trained volunteers and the outcomes of youth in the juvenile court system. Those youth who had volunteers who were trained to be more structured and goal-oriented in their relationships with youth reported more positive outcomes. In another study, DuBois and Neville (1997) found associations between mentors’ appraisals of relationships and youth outcomes, such that mentors’ reports of closeness with their mentees were associated with youth benefits. Others have highlighted the ways in which differences in mentors’ approaches relate to youth’s satisfaction with their relationships. For example, Morrow and Styles (1995) conducted interviews with over 200 adolescents and found that mentoring relationships tended to fall into two broad categories, labeled developmental and prescriptive. Satisfied pairs—defined by feelings of liking, attachment to, and commonality with the other members—were determined to be more developmental and youth-driven. Developmental pairs were considered reliable and trusting, enjoyable, and youth felt supported rather than judged. Prescriptive pairs, on the other hand, were characterized by adult-governed goals, no adjustment of expectations on the part of the adult, and a lack of consistent support from the adult.

Along similar lines, Sipe (1998) synthesized the literature on mentoring and concluded that successful mentors tended to be a steady and involved presence in the youth’s lives, respecting the youth’s viewpoints, and seeking supervision from support staff when needed. In addition, successful mentors respected youth’s desire to have fun. This latter observation has also been made in debates regarding the relative importance of engaging youth in activities versus emotionally based conversations. For example, some researchers suggest that close relationships are more likely to emerge as the by-product of shared involvement in educational, athletic, or other activities. Darling et al. (1994), for example, have argued that mentors who engage with youth in challenging activities are more likely to be successful than those whose primary goal is to simply get to know the adolescent through a focus on conversations about goals, relationships, or problems. They note that emotional connections with nonparent adults appear to grow out of adults’ validation of adolescents’ effort and ability in activities. As they observed, “Ironically, relationships were built when building a relationship was not the main purpose of getting together” (p. 228).

Research from the counseling and parenting literature provide additional insights into the role of structure and support in helping relationships, and the various approaches that adults take when working with children and adolescents. In the counseling literature, Howard et al. (1986) have conceptualized psychotherapists as providing some combination of high or low support and high or low direction. They assert that one style is not necessarily indicative of a better therapeutic relationship than another. Rather, it is the clients’ characteristics and readiness to change that should determine whether high/low direction and high/low support would best develop the therapeutic relationship. In other words, context should be taken into consideration when determining how to best work with the client.

Distinct parenting styles have also been identified, as determined by the relative emphasis that parents place on supportiveness and control (Baumrind, 1968, 1971; Holmbeck et al., 1995). Although parenting that is relatively high in both domains is generally considered to be most conducive to favorable developmental outcomes (Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1995), others have emphasized the importance of considering the context of parenting, including social class and ethnicity (Arendell, 1997; Mason et al., 1994; Portes et al., 1986). For example, middle-class and upper-middle-class mothers grant more autonomy and equality, are less restrictive and punitive, and are more permissive and child-centered than working-class and working poor mothers (cf. Hoff-Ginsberg and Tardiff, 1995; Jarrett, 1995, 1999). These comparisons should not be viewed as pointing to deficits, but should instead be viewed as evidence in the importance of context.

In addition to environmental mediators, it is also important to note age and developmental processes when considering parenting styles. Most of the mentees in this study are adolescents. Adolescence marks an important developmental change in parenting relationships, where children are beginning to rely less on parents and becoming more independent. Indeed, in a 3-year longitu-