

# The role of gender in youth mentoring relationship formation and duration

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## Abstract

The role of gender in shaping the course and quality of adult–youth mentoring relationships was examined. The study drew on data from a large, random assignment evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBSA) programs [Grossman, J. B., & Tierney, J. P. (1998). Does mentoring work? An impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. *Evaluation Review*, 22, 403–426], and focused on variables associated with youth's relationships with their parents and mentors. At baseline, girls reported significantly lower levels of parental trust and higher levels of alienation from their parents than boys. Nonetheless, girls' mentoring relationships lasted significantly longer than those of boys. Moreover, girls were less satisfied than boys in short- and medium-term relationships, but were more satisfied than boys in long-term relationships. Similarly, girls in long-term relationships rated mentoring as more helpful than either the boys or the girls in the shorter-term relationship groups. Particularly in light of the heightened mistrust and alienation from parents at baseline, and the role of improved parent relationships in mediating the effects of mentoring, the protective aspect of longer-lasting mentoring relationships may be particularly salient for girls.

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## 1. Introduction

Surprisingly few studies have focused on how gender might shape youth mentoring relationships. Studies examining gender differences in outcomes among program participants have been mixed (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995), and few studies have looked at differences in relationship quality or length. Consequently, key questions regarding the relative importance of gender-specific approaches to training, supervising, and programming remain unanswered (Bogat & Liang, 2005). In this study, we explore gender differences in young adolescents' approaches to and satisfaction with mentoring relationships.

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### *1.1. Gender and relationships*

Findings from diverse disciplinary perspectives shed light on how gender might affect adult–youth mentoring relationships. Scholars have observed, for example, that males and females tend to respond differently to helping relationships, with women placing relatively greater value on interpersonal support and intimacy than men (Canary & Dindia, 1998). In a meta-analysis, Eagly and Crowley (1986) found that men offered and responded to more instrumental, heroic and chivalrous forms of helping, while women offered and responded to more social, nurturing and caring forms of helping. These patterns can be traced to childhood, where girls tend to forge more intense emotional connections and show higher levels of both verbal expressiveness and non-verbal sensitivity (Brody, 1985). Different theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain these differences, most of which point to how gendered contexts, hierarchies, and socialization patterns shape early behavior (Bem, 1974; Brody, 1985; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). Taken together, these differences might affect mentoring relationships, including their duration and perceived importance and helpfulness (Kram, 1985).

### *1.2. Gender and mentoring cross contexts*

Ragins (1999) has argued that gender is a consideration in work-based mentoring relationships for much the same reason. In particular, because females, as a group, have less power, confront more sexism, and are perceived as more vulnerable than males, their relationships with mentors often serve more psychosocial roles (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Indeed, several studies have shown that male mentors tend to provide more instrumental and career support, whereas female mentorships are often characterized by more emotional support (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2006; Burke, McKeen, & McKenna, 1993; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1993; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Allen and Eby (2004), for example, surveyed nearly 400 mentors and noted this gender difference in support provision. Female mentors may be more comfortable conforming to gender expectations in providing support, as they may sense that their mentees need emotional support. Likewise, Sosik and Godshalk (2000) found that female–female mentoring relationships offered a greater level of friendship, counseling, and personal support than did other gender combinations. Such differences may cause the relationships to take on greater meaning and importance to women. It is also reasonable to predict that a more psychosocial approach to relationships will be more enduring, with social roles and satisfaction deepening as relationships grow in influence (Burke et al., 1993; Kram, 1985).

Studies of student–faculty mentorships have also detected these gender-specific patterns. Male and female faculty members tend to differ in their mentoring styles, with females providing more emotion-focused assistance than males (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). Moreover, female students place relatively more emphasis on their advisors' life-work balance and interests and rate their female faculty mentors as more important to their professional development than do males (Erkut & Mokros, 1984; Gilbert, 1985). Researchers have noted such gender differences among younger students as well, with school-aged girls receiving relatively more support and relatively less criticism and instruction support (Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003). Teachers often rate their relationships with female students as closer and less conflictual than those with their male students (Birch & Ladd, 1997), a difference that is readily perceived by students (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001). Interestingly, Goodenow (1993) found that associations between perceptions of teacher support and positive outcomes were higher for girls than for boys, suggesting their relatively greater importance to girls' adaptive functioning.

### *1.3. Gender in youth mentoring programs*

Taken together, these findings suggest that, across a broad array of mentor–protégé contexts and configurations, gender shapes the functions and importance of relationships (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Gender differences may also affect the underlying processes by which mentors affect youth's outcomes. Specifically, for both sexes, youth mentoring relationships have been assumed to lead to improvements, at least in part through their positive effects on youth's perceptions of parental relationships (Karcher, Davis, & Powell, 2002; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2002; Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005). By serving as

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