# Distal and experiential perspectives of relationship quality from mentors, mentees, and program staff in a school-based youth mentoring program

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## ABSTRACT

Although youth mentoring pairs are often surrounded by external parties who observe and interact with the dyads on a regular basis, these parties are rarely used as informants regarding the quality of the mentoring relationships; rather, assessments are usually based on mentor or mentee self-reports. This study gathered reports of relationship quality from nine mentor-mentee dyads in a New Zealand school-based mentoring program, as well as reports from the program staff who supervised them. Using a descriptive case study approach that combined multiple methods, this study found that while program staff perceptions of relationship quality converged with mentor and mentee survey results for the most part, there was also divergence across perspectives. The findings suggest that program staff can be a valuable source of information on mentoring relationships, and that obtaining multiple perspectives of relationship quality provides a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of youth mentoring relationships.

## 1. Introduction

Formal youth mentoring programs pair non-familial adults with young people to promote youth well-being and success (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Evidence shows youth mentoring bears small but consistent effects, and points to mentoring relationship quality as a key mechanism of change (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). Mentees in quality relationships appear to see greater benefits than mentees who are not (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). With this in mind, assessing relationship quality is critical to gathering the best evidence possible for understanding, and subsequently promoting, quality relationships.

Most assessments of relationship quality rely on self-reports from mentors and mentees. However, there have been calls to gather assessments from external parties who have knowledge of the mentoring pairs, such as family members, teachers, case workers, or program staff (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009) because such informants often have direct contact with, and observation of, mentoring dyads. Program staff, in particular, provide valuable information about relationship quality by drawing on their experience of monitoring the evolution of dyadic relationship development over time and across a range of different relationships. However, it is unknown how their perceptions of relationship quality align with those of mentors and mentees in the relationship and what their insights could offer beyond the observations of those within the relationship.

To explore the perceptions of relationship quality from external parties, we conducted a descriptive case study focusing on a cohort of mentoring dyads and the program staff they interacted with. This article aims to ascertain whether program staff assessments of relationship quality converge with or diverge from reports from mentors and mentees and whether the information obtained from staff offers different insights to those expressed by mentors and mentees. In doing so, we argue that program staff are a useful source of information regarding mentoring relationship quality which should be used more often by researchers.

## 2. Background

The essential premise of youth mentoring is that relationships are transformative, and thus bringing caring adults and vulnerable youth together to establish a relationship can produce real benefits to mentees. Although models of mentoring (Keller, 2005; Larose & Tarabulsky, 2005; Rhodes, 2002) vary in articulating what the mentoring relationship actually does, they all theorize the mentor-mentee relationship as a critical part of the mentoring process. However, simply being in a mentoring relationship is not sufficient to bring about mentee change (Goldner & Scharf, 2014; Li & Julian, 2012). There are factors at work which make some relationships highly effective, and others less so. Relationship quality has been touted as a difference-maker in mentoring relationships (Nakkula & Harris, 2014) as evidence suggests

that high quality relationships are more likely to result in improved outcomes for youth (Bayer, Grossman, & DuBois, 2015; Chan et al., 2013; Goldner & Mayseless, 2009; Zand et al., 2009).

Due to the relational nature of youth mentoring, relationship quality is often conceptualized and measured using constructs that tap into the bond between mentor and mentee, such as closeness (Bayer et al., 2015), dependency (Goldner & Mayseless, 2009), relationship satisfaction (Leyton-Armakan, Lawrence, Deutsch, Williams, & Henneberger, 2012), warmth and trust (Farruggia, Bullen, & Pierson, 2013). Quality youth mentoring relationships have also been associated with developmental relationships (Li & Julian, 2012; Morrow & Styles, 1995). Such relationships are characterized by an emotional attachment between mentor and mentee, a youth-centered approach which prioritizes the mentee's needs and interests, and a balance of power within the dyad. Conversely, prescriptive mentoring relationships tend to be driven by mentor-defined goals, with mentors having limited interest in the interpersonal aspect of mentoring and bypassing the need to establish a connection with mentees in the early stages of the relationship (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

Studies of mentoring relationship quality have largely relied on mentor and mentee self-report data. A number of researchers advocate for the inclusion of both mentor and mentee perspectives (Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, Arbreton, & Pepper, 2000; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005; Zand et al., 2009) to better understand the relationship and ascertain whether mentor and mentee reports of relationship quality converge (Thomson & Zand, 2010; Varga & Deutsch, 2016). Mentors and mentees can experience their relationships differently, with one party believing they had a strong relationship while the other did not. Studies have reported divergent reports of relationship quality stemming from mentees rating relationships more highly than mentors (Rhodes, Schwartz, Willis, & Wu, 2014), and vice versa (Varga & Deutsch, 2016).

Amid the preponderance of mentor and mentee self-report data, there have also been recommendations to collect reports of relationship quality from external parties, such as family or program staff (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Varga & Deutsch, 2016). Theoretical models such as Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Keller's systemic model of mentoring (Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2014) conceptualize youth development as occurring within a dynamic social environment in which they influence and are influenced by others. Supporting young people therefore requires an understanding of their social environment and the myriad of interconnections between people located in the environment. Accordingly, youth mentoring research has increasingly considered the interdependence between dyads and the social environment in which they are located, acknowledging the intricate relationships between mentors, mentees, and other people connected to the relationship, such as family, teachers, case workers, program staff, and peers (Keller, 2005). However, research on the interconnections between youth mentoring dyads and their environment has largely focused on how parents or families (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011), peers (Pryce et al., 2015), and teachers (Lakind, Atkins, & Eddy, 2015) affect the mentoring relationship. In contrast, youth mentoring scholarship has paid little attention to how people in the environment surrounding the dyad perceive the mentoring relationship.

Elsewhere in youth development literature, researchers have recognized the value of investigating "near and distant" frames to better understand complex phenomena involving youth (Bottrell & Armstrong, 2007; Sanders, Munford, & Boden, 2017). "Distant frames", according to Sanders et al. (2017, p. 763), take into account the broader socio-structural and cultural influences on youth, without which the "near frames" that capture individualized perspectives offer only part of the picture. Adapting the concept of Bottrell and Armstrong's (2007) and Sanders et al.'s (2017) near and distant frames of investigation of youth experiences, we argue that youth mentoring research would benefit from soliciting a combination of "distal vs. experiential"

perspectives of mentoring relationship quality. The distal perspective captures the view from those within the broader context who are looking onto the relationship, and the experiential perspective captures the view of those within the relationship. Mentoring research demonstrates that we do not always see what others see of the same relationship — a limitation of using self-reports from single dyad members as highlighted by discrepant mentor and mentee perceptions of relationship quality found in research described earlier (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2014). Through their ongoing monitoring of the evolution of a range of mentoring relationships, program staff can offer a valuable distal perspective of relationship quality. From their bird's eye view, program staff likely observe different relational characteristics to those who are experiencing the relationship from within. We argue that obtaining a richer understanding of the complexity of mentoring relationship quality through both distal and experiential perspectives will deepen understanding of the relational characteristics that are important for mentee development.

Pryce and Keller (2013) offer one example of a study that combines direct observation of pairs by researchers (the distal perspective) with mentor and mentee interviews (the experiential perspective). Their research has produced important findings on how mentor communication styles influence relationship quality (Pryce, 2012; Pryce & Keller, 2013). However, direct observation research is time and resource intensive, and often only provides a snapshot of relationship quality at a particular point in time. To build a larger evidence base of distal and experiential relationship perspectives, researchers also need strategies to capture distal perspectives in a more feasible way, particularly in the resource-strapped environments that characterize youth program delivery (Arnold & Cater, 2011). In addition to issues of time and resourcing, the tendency to focus primarily on mentor and mentee self-reports may be partially attributed to the long-time dominance of community-based mentoring (CBM) programs. Collecting meaningful assessments from CBM program staff may be challenging, as they have little direct interaction and observation of mentoring pairs (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). However, as more structured forms of mentoring, such as school-based mentoring (SBM), continue to grow in popularity, opportunities to gather data from program staff with substantive direct contact with dyads increase. These opportunities may include gathering data from distal individuals who have a view of all the dyadic relationships that make up a youth mentoring program and of their development over time, enabling a more nuanced understanding of relationship quality within the same program context.

## 3. The current study

The current study was undertaken within the context of a SBM program located in Auckland, New Zealand. This program targets youth who are approaching a critical juncture in their education and have been identified by their teachers as being at risk of underachievement as they transition from middle school to high school. Mentees are paired with undergraduate students completing an internship of one academic year (approximately 50 h) as a mentor in a service learning course at The University of Auckland. Mentors are seen as an important resource for mitigating negative outcomes associated with the risk faced by these youth by helping them prepare for a time of significant change. Research has shown the value of additional programmatic support, such as mentoring, during times of educational transition (Sawhill & Karpilow, 2014). Mentors and mentees are paired, but meet in the same space as other mentor-mentee dyads, with whom they are encouraged to interact. Pairs meet for 2 h a week, for one academic year, from late March to mid-November. The current study focused on one site, where the program has been operating since 2008.

This article concentrates on one research question: Do program staff assessments of mentoring relationship quality converge with or diverge from mentor and mentee self-reported ratings? The study was designed as a case study that draws on qualitative and quantitative data to