Building relationships between mentors and youth: Development of the TRICS model

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ABSTRACT

Although previous research identifies high quality relationships between mentors and youth as fundamental to mentorship program success, less is known about how these relationships develop, particularly within group-mentoring models. Therefore, using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, this study explores the process of relationship building between mentors and adolescents. We conducted nine focus groups over two rounds of data collection with youth and staff in a youth development program that predominantly serves African American, low-income youth with a group-mentoring model (n = 71). Using open-coding we identified five key features of the process of relationship building: The Right Who, Respect, Information gathering, Consistency, and Support (TRICS). We used axial-coding to construct a model of the associations among these features. Participants reported that these features promote trust and positive youth development. Model development and sub-categories are described.

High quality mentoring relationships include the provision of resources and psychosocial support over an extended period of time between matched youth and mentors (DuBois & Karcher, 2014; DuBois & Rhodes, 2006; Nakula & Harris, 2014). Mentoring relationships have been related to higher academic achievement, school engagement, and graduation rates, as well as greater well-being and self-esteem, and lower rates of drug and alcohol use among youth (Betts & Pepe, 2005; Cavell & Elledge, 2014; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Lerner, Napolitano, Boyd, Mueller, & Callina, 2014; Rhodes, 2008; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). Furthermore, high quality relationships with mentors have been shown to predict better relationships between youth and their parents, which in turn predict better academic outcomes (Chan et al., 2013).

However, not all mentorship models have equal effects on youth development. Rather, poorly implemented mentorship programs can have adverse effects on youth outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Jekielek et al., 2002). Even with strongly implemented programs, the individual characteristics and experiences of youth (e.g., high stress, sensitivity towards rejection) can make a successful pairing between a mentor and mentee less likely (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012).

Yet, research shows that program effects may be significantly enhanced when mentors use strategies to form high quality relationships with youth (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Karcher & Nakula, 2010; Mekinda & Hirsch, 2014). For example, adult mentors may engage in particular actions to facilitate establishing a supportive relationship with mentees – such as using humor or connecting with other members of youth’s social networks (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Building on this work, the field would benefit from more information and guidance about how to implement these strategies and others in daily practice. Furthermore, although research has focused on one-on-one and small-group mentoring strategies, our knowledge there is no research on how high-quality relationships are established and maintained among mentors who work with a large group of youth (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014). Understanding how one mentor builds relationships with many youth is important because these models may be able to reach a greater number of youth using fewer adults compared to one-on-one programs (Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002). In light of these gaps, the current study takes a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2004) to understand how supportive relationships are built between mentors and adolescents within a community-based group mentoring program.

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1. Theoretical frame

We integrate ecological systems, positive youth development (PYD), and mentoring perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Hirsch et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2005; Rhodes, 2005; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) to understand how to build high quality mentor-mentee relationships. We focus on adolescent mentees because adolescence is a developmental period characterized by increased likelihood of risk behaviors, deepened capacity for emotional intimacy, and increased salience of interpersonal relationships (Hirsch et al., 2011; Makara & Madjar, 2015). Therefore, adolescents may be in need of more prosocial guidance and at the same time be able to create meaningful bonds with mentors in ways children are less able.

Within an ecological systems framework, youth relationships may be examined within the multiple ecologies of their lives such as in school, at home, and in the neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) highlights that a young person's understanding of and experiences with her multiple contexts will also influence how she interprets and understands her environments, the ways that she interacts with mentors and other supportive figures (Spencer et al., 1997), and her interpretations and perceptions of the world, which are based in her experiences of social class, culture, ethnicity, race, and other factors (García Coll et al., 1996). In complement to this phenomenological approach, a PYD perspective draws on a strength-based conception of adolescence in which the alignment of individuals with their ecologies promotes thriving (e.g., Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bisan, & Bowers, 2005, 2010). Importantly, this perspective stresses that there is potential for systematic change in individuals' behavior through their mutually influential relationships with their ecologies (Lerner et al., 2005).

Within the mentorship literature, the youth-mentor relationship is seen as paramount to program effectiveness (Hirsch et al., 2011). Frameworks such as Rhodes' (2005) Model of Youth Mentoring draw on PYD perspectives to examine the processes that underlie the relation between high-quality mentoring and positive youth outcomes. The model indicates that a mentoring relationship characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy will promote social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development among young people, which in turn promote positive developmental outcomes, such as good grades, prosocial behavior, and emotional well-being (Rhodes, 2005).

2. Research on building relationships between mentors and mentees

There are numerous studies on the benefits of high quality mentorship and there is a small but growing body of research on the formal and informal ways adult mentors and youth build relationships (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Herrera et al., 2002; Hirsch et al., 2011; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Pryce, 2012). In this literature, it is most common for researchers to gather information from either youth (Jarrett et al., 2005; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Munson et al., 2010) or mentors (Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014), but not from both sources (for a notable exception see Pryce, 2012).

This research identifies characteristics of mentors and mentees that relate to relationship building. For example, mentors’ similarity to youth in the program can make building relationships more likely (e.g., race, gender, shared history; Hirsch et al., 2011; Munson et al., 2010). As the relationship builds, youths’ perspectives of the mentor may change over time: Youth may view a potential mentor with suspicion and distrust at the beginning of the relationship, but with repeated positive contact mentors and youth can create meaningful connections (Jarrett et al., 2005). Furthermore, when adults engage in specific relationship-building strategies – such as highlighting similarities between themselves and youth, and attending to youth’s social networks – their relationships become more positive (e.g., Jones & Deutsch, 2011).

The majority of the strategies identified in the research literature focus on the dyadic level of mentor-mentee interactions. These strategies include regular contact with youth, informal socializing, remaining open when youth want to have conversations, focusing on similarities with youth, incorporating fun and humor into interactions, maximizing responsiveness to youth, relying on strong teaching skills, and treating youth with respect (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Herrera et al., 2002; Jarrett et al., 2005; Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Jarrett et al. (2005) noted a strategy at the program-level: when mentors are more engaged with the program, they are more likely to create connections with youth. Finally, Jones and Deutsch (2011) identified two strategies that rely on the broader youth ecology: actively including youth in peer group networks to promote positive peer relationships and attending to youth’s proximal relational ties and social networks – particularly regarding conflict and trauma.

Often, mentoring programs are designed to specifically help “at-risk” youth (e.g., youth experiencing financial, emotional, and/or physical stressors, displaying internalizing or externalizing behaviors, or struggling academically; Pryce, 2012). However, many of the studies on building relationships between mentors and mentees sample from programs that do not target at-risk youth (Jarrett et al., 2005; Jones & Deutsch, 2011), though they may work in communities with high proportions of at-risk youth (Herrera et al., 2011; Lakind et al., 2014). A few studies have examined mentoring relationships among at-risk youth specifically, and found that these youth value consistency, longevity, trust, authenticity, respect, and empathy, and that mentors who are personable, understanding, attuned to youth, and similar to the youth themselves are more likely to build successful relationships (Munson et al., 2010; Pryce, 2012).

Examinations of unsuccessful relationship formation may also provide lessons about how strong relationships are formed. Spencer (2006) found that six factors contributed to the cessation of a mentor-protégé relationship within Big Brothers Big Sisters programs: mentor or protégé abandonment; perceived lack of protégé motivation; unfulfilled expectations; deficiencies in mentor relational skills and abilities to bridge cultural divides; family interference; and inadequate program support. Alternately, Karcher, Nakkula, and Harris (2005) showed that if mentors feel efficacious and their relationship with the youth is strong, they are more likely to persist in the relationship. This persistence is key as some research shows that when mentors are regularly absent, they may do more harm than good for their mentees (Karcher et al., 2005). Overall, the literature on building relationships between mentors and youth focuses more on identifying and describing overarching strategies for connecting with youth, and focuses less on how mentors can enact these strategies in their day-to-day interactions with youth.

In comparison to one-on-one designs, group mentoring programs match a single mentor with two or more mentees (Herrera et al., 2002). There is limited knowledge about how to promote successful mentor-mentee relationships in small group designs (e.g., adult to youth ratios of 1:10) and almost nothing is known about mentorship models that involve large groups (e.g., adult to youth ratios of 1:40; Carswell, Hanlon, O'Grady, Watts, & Pothong, 2009; Kupermine & Thomason, 2014). Understanding how to build strong relationships among mentors and mentees in group programs is particularly important as research shows mixed relations between program participation and positive developmental outcomes for youth (e.g., Kupermine & Thomason, 2014). It is possible that the findings on group mentoring programs are mixed in part because group dynamics attenuate the quality of the connection between mentor and mentee as mentors strive to meet the unique needs of each youth.

3. The current study

In light of the potential benefits of high quality mentor-youth...
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