The impact of Big Brothers Big Sisters programs on youth development: An application of the model of homogeneity/diversity relationships

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is a non-profit agency that provides mentoring for at-risk, economically disadvantaged youth. Its three objectives include helping youth to improve self-competence, offering encouragement to improve school performance, and fostering youth relationships with family members, peers, and other adults through one-to-one mentoring relationships. In this study, we examined these mentoring relationships, assessing whether gender match types and program types are associated with the developmental areas of school-aged children in the BBBSA program. To measure protégé confidence, competence, and caring, we employed Ragins' model of homogeneity/diversity and utilized multivariate ordinary least square regression with 267 matched pairs from the BBBSA program-based outcome evaluation. Our findings illustrated that same-gender matches were negatively associated with competence, second, that cross-gender matches of female mentors/male protégés showed better competence and caring outcome than a same-gender of female mentors/female protégés, third, that same-gender matches of male mentors/male protégés showed better improvement on caring score than a same match of female mentors/female protégés, and fourth, that community-based programs had significantly higher confidence and caring scores than school-based programs. Implications for practice, policy, and future research are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Mentorship involves the development of a creative and supportive relationship between two parties (Allen & Eby, 2010). Since the characteristics of each mentoring relationship may be varied (i.e., formal vs. informal), each mentoring relationship is different; however, all mentoring relationships share interpersonal and idiosyncratic patterns (Allen & Eby, 2010). They also include learning partnerships that promote the acquisition of knowledge and skill development for protégés, with the primary goal of developing the proteges' potential in a particular area (Allen & Eby, 2010). Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is a non-profit agency that provides mentoring for at-risk youth who come from economically disadvantaged and/or single parent households. BBBSA pursues three objectives: to help children improve self-competence, to encourage to perform better in school, and to foster youth relationships with family, peers, and other adults through a one-to-one mentoring relationships.

While evaluations of mentoring programs have predominantly examined overall effectiveness (Converse & Lignugaris, 2008; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006; Smith & Stormont, 2011; Wit, Lipman, Manzano-Munguia, Bisanz, et al., 2007), the method programs employ to match at-risk youth and mentors effectively (basing matches on demographic characteristics) have received less consideration. Mentoring relationships are same- or cross-gender matched, but the specific subject of gender dyads in youth mentorship, particularly in school-aged children mentorship, has not gained sufficient attention (Ramaswami & Drehr, 2010). To provide mentoring programs with more accurate and updated information for taking care of their young protégés, researchers should explore the process of specific gender matching types (LeCroy, 2005). In order for mentors and protégés to be matched more effectively and thus gain optimal benefits of that relationship for at-risk youth, the importance of gender compositions and program differences should be acknowledged in mentoring programs (O'Brien, Biga, Kessler, & Allen, 2010; Ramaswami & Drehr, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to better understand how a mentoring program’s outcomes differ by same/cross-gender matches through applying the model of homogeneity/diversity of mentoring relationships and by school/community-based programs.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Mentoring programs

Since the number of mentoring programs for at-risk youth, such as BBBSA, Boys and Girls Club, and Community in Schools, has increased in the United States, the outcomes and effectiveness of such programs have been widely studied and confirmed. Specifically, mentorship research has examined three crucial elements in youth development, including self-confidence, positive role models, and socio-emotional support. Findings have demonstrated that, by maintaining strong relationships with positive role models, mentorship can positively influence these factors in three distinctive developmental domains, self-confidence, cognitive, and social-emotional in youth (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Wit et al., 2007). Not surprisingly, mentored youth become more successful members of society, earn higher salaries, remain more consistent in the workforce, and display more positive attitudes toward their jobs than those who have not been mentored (Allen & Eby, 2010). In an effort to sustain and enrich matched relationships, mentoring programs must create adequate organizational infrastructure, seek resources, and involve extensive policies for activities and practices, including recruiting, screening, and training mentors, and ongoing supervision of mentoring relationships (DuBois et al., 2011). For instance, BBBSA local agencies emphasize providing training sessions and orientations for parents and mentors on a regular basis (i.e., support relationships) (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2003). During these events, all participants learn BBBSA’s programs, services, benefits, rules, expectations, the needs of children, and characteristics of potential agency mentees. Staff interview mentors to discover their psychosocial history and their suitability for mentoring children (BBBS of Washtenaw County, 2008) and to provide educational materials relevant to child safety indicators and encourage matches to develop meaningful friendships (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2003). In order to observe and ensure matched behaviors and to resolve any problems detected with a match, BBBS staff contact children/mentors at least four times a year, using varied methods of communication (including telephone and/or email) (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2003; Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

Thus far, considerable studies sampling young adults such as college students, interns, employees have been conducted to examine protégés’ outcomes associated with different gender dyads (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005; Allen & Eby, 2004; Blake-Beard, Bayne, & Crosby, 2011; Bressler, 2004; Dua, 2007; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Fagenson-Eland, Baugh, & Lankau, 2005; Hilmer & Hilmer, 2006; Kao, Rogers, Spitzmuller, Lin, & Lin, 2014; Little, Kearney, & Britner, 2010; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000; Walker, 2006; Young, Cady, & Foxon, 2006). However, their findings may not be applicable to mentoring programs that target children. Also, these aforementioned studies have had mixed findings on the association between same/cross-gender matched relationships and mentoring effectiveness (Ortiz-Walters, Eddleston, & Simione, 2010). Additionally, although there are two distinctive types of mentoring programs, school and community based, studies comparing and contrasting effectiveness of the two types are lacking.

2.2. Gender matches: same-gender and cross-gender matches

Empirical findings on same- versus cross-gender mentoring relationships have been inconsistent. In general, studies have found that, compared to youth in cross-gender mentoring relationships, protégés matched with same gender mentors reported higher levels of efficacy and confidence (Blake-Beard et al., 2011), more psychosocial support (Kao et al., 2014; Koberg, Boss, Chappell, & Ringer, 1994), and stronger developmental relationships and frequency of communication (Fagenson-Eland et al., 2005). For example, girls sought more psychosocial support, defined as development of personal traits/qualities, social attitudes and skills, and interpersonal relationships (Spencer & Liang, 2009). In same-gender matches, female protégés matched with female mentors reported a greater level of friendship, counselling, personal support, and sponsorship (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000), intimacy and closeness (Sullivan, 1996 as cited in Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy, & Sánchez, 2006), relationship enjoyment, and ease of sharing feminist ideas (Bressler, 2004). However, boys sought more instrumental (goal-oriented, academic performance) support in career related areas from mentors when matched with male mentors (Darling et al., 2006).

On the other hand, several studies have revealed either no significant differences between same-gender and cross-gender matching relationships (Allen & Eby, 2004; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Kanchewa, Rhodes, Schwartz, & Olshe, 2014; Sosik & Godshalk, 2000) or support for cross-gender matches (Kao et al., 2014; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005; Ugrin, Odom, & Pearson, 2008). In particular, Allen and Eby (2004) found no significant gender-match-related outcomes except finding that female mentors were more likely to interact with female protégés than male protégés and that male mentors interacted equally with male and female protégés. Sosik and Godshalk (2000) also found no gender-related differences in relation to protégés’ behavior, attributes, and psychosocial support. Similarly, Kanchewa et al. (2014) found that male protégés had similar academic, behavioral, and social outcomes and similar relational processes regardless of being matched with male or female mentors. Finally, even though Kao et al. (2014) found that cross-gender matches did not help increase psychosocial mentoring but did help improve career mentoring and relationship resilience.

2.3. Program types: community-based and school-based programs

BBBSA programs consist of two types: community-based programs and school-based programs. Although the two programs share the same overall goal of enhancing positive socio-emotional development of at-risk youth through mentoring relationships with qualified adults, the programs have clear differences. In the community-based program, carefully screened volunteers are matched with youth, and the mentor-protégé pair agrees to meet at least a couple of hours twice a month. While participating in the community-based program, volunteers and their protégés do arranged activities together in neighborhood settings throughout the calendar year (e.g., sports, games, movies) (Grossman et al., 2012). Community-based programs are considered traditional programs and account for about 50% of all structured mentoring programs (DuBois & Rhodes, 2006). Several studies have found the positive impact of community-based mentoring on youth outcomes. For instance, focusing on BBBSA community match program, Wit et al. (2007) found that youth in the program decreased their emotional problems and social anxiety and improved social support and social skills more than youth in the control group. Using BBBSA community dataset, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) discovered that 12 month or longer matches helped participants improve scholastic competence and school attendance and helped them avoid drug and alcohol use more than shorter matches. Most of all, findings from the BBBSA study by Tierney, Grossman, and Ewaxh (1995) identified a variety of benefits of community-focused mentoring for children from low-income families, such as reducing antisocial activities (using drug and alcohol, hitting someone) and improving both academic outcomes (grades, scholastic competence, attendance) and social-behavioral, emotional areas (bettering relationships with families, peers).

In recent years, school-based programs have become a popular alternative to community-based programs (Grossman et al., 2012). In these programs, the role model may be an adult or an older student. Activities are school-related and are held in a specific location within the school site during school hours. Generally, volunteers and children socialize, work on homework assignments together, or play sports for at least 1 h per week (DuBois & Rhodes, 2006). Both programs require...
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