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Mentor Support Provisions Scale: Measure dimensionality, measurement invariance, and associations with adolescent school functioning

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring relationships can have important effects on adolescents' psychosocial and academic outcomes; however, the transactions within mentoring relationships that may account for impact on psychosocial and academic outcomes are not well understood. This study investigated the psychometric properties of the Mentor Support Provisions Scale (MSPS), a tool for assessing the types of support that mentors provide. Exploratory factor analyses and confirmatory factor analyses were used to determine measure dimensionality. Findings indicated acceptable fit with a three-factor structure: Academic Support, Intimacy, and Warmth. The MSPS was found to have scalar invariance; thus, factor loadings and intercepts are the same across student sex and ethnic groups (e.g., White, Hispanic, and Black). In structural equation modeling analyses, the three latent factors predicted academic engagement and reading and math achievement, above baseline scores. Research and practical uses of the MSPS are discussed.

1. Introduction

A natural mentor is commonly defined as a nonparental adult with whom a youth shares a close, trusting relationship in which the mentor provides guidance and encouragement (Rhodes, 2002; Rishel, Cottrell, Stanton, Cottrell, & Branstetter, 2010). Natural mentoring relationships are fostered organically, without the involvement of an agency, and mentors commonly include family members, family friends, teachers, coaches, and religious leaders. These relationships are fostered with adolescents regardless of risk status, as opposed to formal programs that utilize selection criteria. Accordingly, they have been found to occur at a greater frequency than formal mentoring relationships (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b; MENTOR, 2006; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005). Due to their potential for longer duration and more frequent contact, mentoring relationships may be particularly influential in adolescents' lives.

Research on natural mentoring has examined its role in positive youth adjustment (e.g., depression, anxiety, well-being, optimism, identity development, behavioral delinquency), primarily focusing on populations of at-risk youth (e.g., ethnic minorities, adolescent mothers). This research has yielded inconsistent findings. Rhodes, Ebert, and Fischer (1992) found that youth with natural mentors reported less depression, as well as more optimism, higher expectations for career attainment, and social support, than those without mentors. Similarly, Hurd and Zimmerman (2010b, 2010a) found that the presence of a natural mentor was associated with fewer depressive symptoms for adolescents over a five-year trajectory. Other studies, however, reported no association between

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natural mentors and adolescents' internalizing symptoms (Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). In examining delinquency, studies have demonstrated that adolescents with natural mentors exhibit less gang affiliation, violent and nonviolent problem behaviors, and risky sexual behaviors (Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, & Bontempo, 2000; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b; Zimmerman et al., 2002). Findings related to substance abuse, however, have proven inconsistent (Beier et al., 2000; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010a). Studies have also examined natural mentoring associations with academic outcomes. The literature indicated positive associations with high school performance, educational pursuit and attainment (e.g., high school graduation, college attendance; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005b; Klaw, Rhodes, & Fitzgerald, 2003), as well as school attitudes (e.g., school attachment, school importance, academic efficacy; Sanchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2002). Associations with grades, however, have been inconclusive. For instance, Chang et al. (2010) found positive associations between grades and natural mentoring relationships for adolescents, wherein Sanchez et al. (2008) failed to detect any association.

To date, the literature on natural mentoring has focused on the association of structural aspects of the relationships (e.g., mentor role, frequency of contact and longevity of the relationship) with various psychosocial and academic outcomes (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Rishel et al., 2010; Sanchez et al., 2008). The importance of quality in natural mentoring relationships has also been noted (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Rhodes et al., 1992). However, there has been a lack of attention given to the transactions within these relationships that make natural mentoring effective, specifically the various provisions or types of support garnered from mentors. The lack of research in this area may be due, in part, to the lack of established measures for assessing the support provisions that occur in mentoring relationships. To advance research on mentoring relationships, the current study evaluated the technical properties of a tool designed to evaluate the nature of support that mentors provide.

1.1. *Affective and academic support*

One would anticipate that natural mentors differ in the types of support they provide and that these variations may be differentially linked to school functioning. For example, a teacher serving as a natural mentor may be more apt to provide an adolescent with academic support (e.g., assistance with work, appreciation for behavioral engagement and motivation) and this academic support may contribute to an adolescent's increased achievement and engagement. Although research has yet to examine such provisions, we anticipated these varying provisions to include both affective support and support for specific performance domains, including school success.

Many studies have examined the effect of students' sense of relatedness to parents, teachers, and peers on academic achievement and engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Wentzel, 1997, 1998). The impact of the student-teacher relationship, specifically as it relates to pedagogical caring, most closely aligns with our conceptualization of affective and academic support within a natural mentoring relationship (Noddings, 1992).

Several authors have noted that students' perceptions of teacher support may be especially important during the transition to middle school, when normative levels of teacher support decline (Eccles et al., 1993; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012). Consistent with this reasoning, Furrer and Skinner (2003) analyzed children's sense of relatedness to parents, teachers, and peers from third to sixth grade. They found that children who reported higher relatedness demonstrated greater emotional and behavioral engagement in school, and relatedness uniquely contributed above the effects of perceived control. Teacher relatedness was most strongly associated with emotional engagement, and it was a more influential predictor during middle school, as opposed to elementary school. Sakiz, Pape, and Hoy (2012) also found perceived teacher affective support was positively related to school belonging, academic enjoyment, academic hopelessness, and academic self-efficacy, which were then associated with increased academic engagement in middle school mathematics classrooms. Finally, Wentzel (1998) examined the relation between sixth grade students' perceived parent, teacher, and peer support and academic motivation. Perceived teacher support was inclusive of affective (e.g., caring) and academic support (e.g., help with learning) and was found to be a positive predictor of school- and class-related interest, as well as prosocial academic behavior, above other support sources. Such results indicate the important role of affective and academic support provisions in teacher-student relations at varying points in childhood and adolescence and are indicative of the effects of these provisions of support in relationships with other nonparental adults.

1.2. *Provisions of support in mentoring relationships*

Beyond understanding those outcomes associated with effective natural mentoring relationships, research must also examine what transpires within these relationships that may explain their effects. To date, the literature has largely focused on the association of structural aspects of the natural mentoring relationships, including the frequency of contact and longevity of the relationship, with various psychosocial and academic outcomes. There has been a lack of attention given to the transactions within these relationships that make natural mentoring effective, specifically the various provisions or types of support garnered from mentors. Natural mentoring research has indicated the importance of affective support (e.g., warmth, nurturance, trust, openness) in a relationship, as these social support provisions relate to increased relationship quality (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a; Rhodes et al., 1992). Related literature on teacher-student relationships and formal mentoring relationships suggests that in addition to affective support, academic support may also be influential in school functioning (Cham, Hughes, West, & Im, 2014). Academic support is defined as transmitting the value of education, showing an interest in school, communicating high academic expectations, assisting with school tasks, and providing support for educational pursuits. Research on teacher-student relationships has found that adolescent-reports of high teacher educational expectations predict school belonging (Cham et al., 2014) and academic motivation (Legault, Green-

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