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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From Treatment to Empowerment: New Approaches to Youth Mentoring

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Abstract Traditional approaches to formal youth mentoring have focused primarily on improving the lives of "at-risk" youth through the assignment of individual mentors who are typically disconnected from youth's communities. Similarly, research in the field of formal mentoring has emphasized the dyadic relationship between the mentor and the mentee, with less attention paid to the broader relational contexts in which such relationships unfold. The current paper proposes a new framework that expands the scope of mentoring interventions to include approaches that build on and cultivate informal supports and empower youth to identify and reach out to networks of potential supportive adults, thus increasing the reach of youth mentoring.

Keywords Mentoring · Positive youth development · Social capital · Empowerment · Adolescents

Introduction

Although formal youth mentoring programs have expanded dramatically in recent decades, the emphasis has been largely on the individual relationship between the mentor and mentee, with less attention paid to the broader contexts in which such relationships unfold. Moreover, isolated, one-to-one pairing is a relatively inefficient way to bridge the growing gap between the number of youth who could benefit from mentor support and those who have it. In this paper, we argue for a more inclusive model of mentoring, shifting the focus from formal one-on-one "treatment" approaches to more broadly strengthening networks of supportive intergenerational connections and empowering young people to reach out to and draw on such connections. We believe that the field of youth mentoring is ripe for such expansion and innovation.

Background

Youth mentoring is generally defined as a relationship between a young person and an older, more experienced non-parental figure who provides guidance, support, and encouragement to the mentee (DuBois & Karcher, 2014). Positive effects are theorized to derive from the support and role modeling that such a relationship can offer (Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). The goal of the youth mentoring movement is to increase the number of young people who have at least one supportive mentoring relationship. To this end, formal mentoring programs have generally focused their efforts on recruiting volunteer mentors and matching them with youth, particularly youth identified as "at-risk" for poor developmental outcomes. Formal mentoring relationships are often contrasted with informal or natural mentoring relationships, which develop organically between young people and the adults in their extended families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Natural mentoring has been used for generations in communities across the world to transmit culture, knowledge, skills, and support to young people. Natural mentoring relationships tend to be more durable and reap greater benefits than formal

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mentoring relationships (e.g. DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Spencer, 2007; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005). Contemporary Western society, as well as the increasing spread of Western societal norms across the globe, however, allow for few opportunities for young people to develop relationships with adults outside of their nuclear family (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2003; Rhodes, 2005). Accordingly, approximately a third of youth in the United States report never experiencing a mentoring relationship (Putnam, 2015).

Formal mentoring programs represent one approach to addressing the dearth of naturally forming mentoring relationships. Such programs in the United States currently serve approximately two and a half million youth each year (E. Raposa & J. Rhodes, unpublished data). Formal mentoring programs trace their roots to the Progressive Era in the United States and the widening class divides of the early 1900s. Mounting concern over the growing ranks of children born into poverty led to the creation of a wide range of social service programs for urban, low-income youth. One of the earliest precursors of mentoring to emerge from this era was the "Friendly Visitor" campaign, in which middle-class volunteers (primarily White women) were dispatched to the homes of the poor with the goal of the "moral elevation of the poor" (Gurteen, 1882; pp. 26). The rhetoric was that of kind saviors, providing "sweetness and order and light" to families living in poverty (Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 1887, pp. 133). Yet, as described by Freedman (1992, pp. 7–8), "The genteel and sometimes patronizing outsiders discovered a population more inclined to turn to their friends and neighbors for solace than to the representatives of middle-class life." The program also suffered from a dearth of volunteers which, over time, led to a reliance on paid representatives. Eventually, the movement was incorporated into the emerging profession of social work.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the first and still the largest mentoring program in the United States, also grew out of the Progressive Era. The idea was inspired by Irvin Westheimer, a Cincinnati businessman who befriended a young boy after witnessing him digging through the garbage outside his office. Westheimer soon began urging his friends to follow his example and become "big brothers" to local boys in need. This approach was formalized in 1904 when Ernest Coulter, a Philadelphia-based child advocate and court clerk, founded Big Brothers as an organization that mobilized middle-class volunteers to provide support and guidance to poor, delinquent children. Like the Friendly Visitors program that preceded it, the growth of Big Brothers was fueled by a desire to rescue poor children (mostly delinquent boys) from poverty and the problems of their homes and neighborhoods. This intention is made clear from the opening sentence of his classic book, "*The Children in the Shadow*," in which Coulter states that, "This is the story of the three delinquents, the child, the parent and the community…" (Coulter, 1913; , p. xiii). He goes on to explain that "[t]he delinquent parent is a much more serious problem than the delinquent child," and "[t]he community is the most culpable of the three delinquents…" (Coulter, 1913, p. xv). In the context of the early 1900s, Coulter's views were actually progressive as they represented a departure from a punishing court system that treated children as adults toward a more compassionate view that shifted the blame for poor childhood outcomes to the family and the community.

Few mentoring programs today would explicitly endorse such a condemning view of the parents and communities of the youth they serve. Yet, in many ways, this basic paradigm is still reflected in the most common mentoring intervention models. In particular, most formal mentoring is still characterized in terms of one-on-one relationships between youth in underserved communities and middle-class (most often White and female) volunteers from outside their communities. This approach is perhaps best illustrated in a prominent mentoring program's advertisement, in which the White volunteer is both literally and figuratively leading the young Black man across the tracks.

To the extent that families and communities are considered at all, they are generally seen as a benign or even

risky backdrop to the mentor and youth dyad. In fact, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Spencer & Basualdo-Monico, 2014; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011; Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2014), the role of parents has been largely absent from the research literature on youth mentoring. When parents have been considered, it is frequently in the context of managing their potentially intrusive, obstructive, or otherwise negative influence on the development of the mentoring relationship (e.g., Philip, Shucksmith, & King, 2004; Styles & Morrow, 1992). Taylor & Porcellini (2014) have suggested that the view of parents as saboteurs stems from the perception of mentoring as compensating for an inadequate family life. Moreover, recent research on mentors' perceptions in an influential paid mentoring program revealed that, although mentors focused on their mentees' strengths, the mentees' parents and communities were viewed primarily as negative influences (Lakind, Atkins, & Eddy, 2015).

In the current backdrop of soaring inequality and both race- and class-based segregation, such models raise difficult questions. To a certain extent, the growing attention to children's attitudes (e.g., Paunesku et al., 2015) and attributes (e.g., Duckworth & Gross, 2014) plays into this focus on the decontextualized child. Social psychologists refer to our tendency to focus on individual, dispositional factors and to deemphasize the social context as the fundamental attribution error (e.g., Weiner & Graham, 1999). It draws our attention away from the profound opportunity gaps and structural inequality, and from the recognition and cultivation of positive resources that may already exist within children's broader environments.

The field of formal mentoring has been particularly prone to this overemphasis on the individual. The formation of one-on-one relationships as the most direct path to improvement is easier to visualize and manage than other approaches to youth service. And, because it locates the problem (a lack of role models) and solution (deployment of predominately middle-class volunteers) at the personal level, it fits neatly into American notions of upward mobility, rugged individualism, "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps" ideology (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006; Walker, 2005).

The field's somewhat narrow focus on the individual may also help to explain its relatively modest effects. Indeed, despite a growing body of research, as well as the development of clear standards for practice, the impact of formal mentoring programs on a range of academic, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes has not substantially improved over the past few decades (e.g., DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011). Moreover, the effects tend to erode almost entirely once the mentoring relationship ends, which is typically within 1–2 years (e.g., Aseltine, Dupre, & Lamlein, 2000; Herrera et al., 2011). Formal mentoring programs also face the problem of relatively high attrition rates (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) and long waitlists resulting from an insufficient number of volunteers to meet demand. Recruitment efforts can increase capacity but the volunteer pool remains limited by the cost of outreach and the growing (and sizable) gap between the number of mentors who are willing to make an often year-long commitment and the number of youth on waiting lists.

It is worth noting that community psychologists have long noted that, when traditional treatment models fail to consider the broader context of poverty, discrimination, and powerless from which many social, academic, and behavioral difficulties arise, they fall prey to inefficiency at best and victim blaming at worst. The field of community psychology sought to expand the reach of traditional therapeutic models by advocating for the inclusion of affordable, accessible services in neighborhood settings, reducing the incidence of problems through preventative interventions, and empowering affected individuals and their communities to create their own solutions (Rappaport, 1981). In an influential study, Cowen et al. (1979) described how bartenders, barbers, beauticians and cab drivers often served as informal agents of care and support because their jobs provided frequent contact with people often in significant distress. Building on this finding, he also documented how people discussed serious personal problems with their hairdressers, bartenders, lawyers, and supervisors, and suggested providing training in therapeutic techniques to these informal agents of care (Cowen, 1982). Likewise, Rappaport argued for an empowerment approach that drew on existing community support systems, such as religious and voluntary organizations (Rappaport, 1981). In this context, empowerment was defined as a process through which individuals or groups reduced their marginalization by gaining more control over their lives, developing valuable skills and resources and, over time, achieving important life goals (Rappaport, 1987; Maton, 2008).

Although formal mentoring deploys volunteers rather than professionals to provide support, many formal mentoring programs continue to carry the legacy and inefficiencies of the individual, decontextualized, and deficit-based models from which they first emerged. The majority of funding, practice, and research in the field has remained tightly focused on the formal mentoring dyad, with little attention to community supports and the potential scope and benefits of informal ties. Consequently, the demand for youth mentoring has far outstripped the

availability of formal one-on-one relationships through programs. Indeed, in a recent reanalysis of national survey data (MENTOR, 2012), Putnam (2015) highlighted the fact that, of the two-thirds of youth in the United States who reported ever having had a mentor, only 4% derived their mentoring solely from formal mentoring programs. Instead, the vast majority of mentoring takes place outside the realm of mentoring programs (e.g., in families, neighborhoods, schools). Putnam's analysis also revealed that informal mentoring lasted about 30 months on average, compared to approximately 18 months for formal relationships. Thus, combining frequency and duration, youth in the United States derive about eight times as much informal as formal mentoring.

On the face of it, these data could be taken to suggest that there are already a plenty of caring adults out there and that the majority of young people are perfectly adept at enlisting mentors to help support their developmental needs. Yet, more than one-third of youth report never having had a mentor. Moreover, by an uncomfortable margin, affluent youth are far more likely than youth in the lowest income quartile to have informal mentors. Indeed, with the exception of extended family members (who, research suggests, typically provide vital emotional support, but are less likely to provide information or resources for academic and career success, Burt, 2005; Granovetter, 1983), youth in the top socioeconomic status quartile report dramatically more informal mentoring across every category of adult (e.g., teachers, coaches, employers) (Putnam, 2015). These disparities in social capital contribute to the perpetuation of class-based segregation and unequal opportunities for educational and career advancement (Timpe & Lunkenheimer, 2015). Indeed, a recent large-scale national survey of college graduates highlighted the key role of mentors in shaping students' college and career trajectories as well as their overall life satisfaction (Gallup, Inc., 2014), while other research has emphasized the connection between mentors and college completion and success (Crisp, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In college and university settings as well, however, stark differences emerge based on socioeconomic status, race, and first-generation college student status (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Museus, 2010). Given their importance, and the disparities in the formation of these bonds, a broader effort is needed to support the development of connections with mentors for all young people.

In summary, formal mentoring represents a relatively limited approach that has proven to have only modest effects in improving youth outcomes. These challenges, combined with large disparities in access to informal mentors, suggest a need to widen the net of mentoring strategies. In the remaining sections, we propose a new, more inclusive framework for youth mentoring and describe examples of specific approaches within this framework which mobilize community resources and empower youth to draw on natural supports within their existing networks.

A New Framework for Youth Mentoring

We propose a framework for youth mentoring that is informed by a positive youth development and developmental systems theory. The proposed model represents a further expansion of the most widely accepted theoretical model of youth mentoring, which focuses primarily on the mentor-youth dyad. Specifically, Rhodes (2005) mapped how, when an individual mentoring relationship is characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy, it can lead to social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development in the mentee. Although this model highlighted the key role of relationship quality, as well as developmental pathways through which mentoring may influence a range of outcomes, its emphasis is narrowly focused on the dyad, with little attention to the influence of the broader relational and societal contexts.

Keller (2005) expanded on this model to include a family systems perspective, which acknowledged relationships among the mentor, mentee's parents, and program staff and, in a later revision, the broader relationships that might influence the dyad (Keller & Blakeslee, 2014). Additionally, Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport (2013) explored the idea of a social justice-oriented approach to mentoring program practices, situating mentoring relationships within the broader frame of youth-adult partnerships (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005), in which youth and adults work together as partners in community activism (Liang et al., 2013). Importantly, this perspective recognized the role of power, privilege, and systemic barriers in the lives of youth.

Although both Keller and Liang's work provide valuable perspectives to the field of youth mentoring, the broader context of relationships and society is considered primarily through the lens of their influence on the dyadic relationship formed between the youth and the formal-assigned mentor. The proposed framework builds on these previous models while expanding the scope to more fully encompass and strengthen the broader social ecology. To accomplish this, we draw on positive youth development perspectives and development systems theories as they pertain to supportive youth-adult relationships (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015).

Positive youth development perspectives emphasize the promotion of developmental competencies, strengths, and

resources rather than focusing on risk and pathology (Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005). Within this context, the developmental systems approach seeks to develop *assets* in youth, including those located within the individual (e.g., self-esteem), as well as those located within the environment (e.g., supportive peer networks), with emphasis placed on the interaction between individual and environmental assets (Benson & Scales, 2009; Lerner et al., 2015). Drawing on this model, youth may possess individual skills and attitudes, such as a willingness to seek support or the ability to reach out to or maintain relationships with adults, which may facilitate connection more broadly and mentoring relationships in particular. Additionally, youth's environments may possess assets or resources, such as the presence and availability of caring adults, which also contribute to whether or not a given young person develops a mentoring relationship. Importantly, it is the interaction or fit between the availability of potential mentors and youth's capacity to take advantage of their presence that leads to youth reaping the benefits of mentoring relationships.

Much research on mentoring relationships has focused on connectedness as a property or state that is either present or absent in a young person, rather than as an active process (Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson & Varga, 2016). Other researchers have emphasized the conditions or behaviors that give rise to the development of connectedness (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). The developmental asset framework allows for recognition of both the connections a young person may have as well as the behaviors, attitudes, contexts, and interactions that give rise to such connections.

Building on this framework, we propose an expansion of mentoring interventions to promote connectedness more broadly through the strengthening of both individual and environmental assets. This expanded definition includes traditional formal mentoring programs which represent one strategy to increase environmental assets by bringing additional caring adults into youth's networks. At the same time, it increases the scope of youth mentoring to include other approaches that recognize and strengthen existing connections, develop potential natural mentors in schools, communities and neighborhoods, and empower youth to draw on such connections. In the following section, we describe a range of new approaches to youth mentoring that fall within this framework of developing individual and environmental assets to promote the development of intergenerational relationships.

New Approaches to Youth Mentoring

In the *Youth-Initiated Mentoring* (YIM) approach, youth nominate adults to serve as their mentors, selecting from among the adults who are already in their social networks. YIM program staff then provide relationship oversight, including screening, training, and supporting the nominated adults. This hybrid model aims to bring together the strengths of informal mentoring relationships with the infrastructure and support provided by formal mentoring programs. YIM has been successfully deployed for over a decade through the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program (NGYCP), an intensive program for adolescents who dropped out of high school. An evaluation of NGYCP suggested the potential of YIM in improving academic and career outcomes and reducing delinquent outcomes (Schwartz, Chan, Rhodes, & Scales, 2013; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016). Compared with traditional formal mentoring programs, the YIM approach resulted in longer lasting relationships, and a three-year follow-up showed that enduring YIM relationships was associated with less erosion of program effects (Schwartz, Chan et al., 2013; Schwartz, Rhodes et al., 2013). Importantly, relationships were more enduring when youth played a more active role in selecting their own mentors (rather than parents or program staff). Although more research is needed to investigate the impacts of this model in other contexts, the YIM approach appears to be a promising strategy, particularly for older adolescents, that builds on the infrastructure of formal mentoring programs, while empowering adolescents to identify, draw upon, and strengthen existing support.

In an extension of this approach, typically used with high school and college students, the *Connected Scholars Program* actively supports students in developing their capacity to cultivate a network of supportive adults, with an emphasis on academic and career mentors rather than a single mentoring relationship (Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016). Students are guided in creating visual representations (sometimes called ecomaps) of their connections to identify potential sources of social capital and mentoring. They then develop skills and practice strategies for reaching out to and strengthening these sources of support through role-playing, structured conversations, and networking events. Results from a qualitative study of a program serving ethnic minority, low-income, and first-generation pre-collegiate students showed promising findings in its capacity to develop youth's help-recruiting skills, as well as their motivation and efficacy in accessing social support (Schwartz et al., 2016). Another approach, still in the early stages of development, combines this type of youth training with the scaffolding of the more formal approach to mentoring. In this approach, sometimes called *Network Engaged Mentoring* (S. Schwartz, T. Cavell, N. Hurd, R. Spencer, & J. Rhodes, unpublished manuscript), formal mentors are

encouraged to help mentees identify and actively engage with other caring adults within their networks (e.g., teachers, afterschool staff, extended family members, etc.). Like the *Connected Scholars Program*, this approach is designed to help young people identify and develop connections beyond an isolated, assigned mentoring relationship. And, since formal mentoring relationships are often time-limited, this approach provides a context for orienting and transitioning youth toward informal mentoring relationships as part of the relationship termination process.

Finally, *Intentional Mentoring* approaches seek to increase the availability of caring adults who serve as mentors. If the first three approaches "teach youth to fish,", this strategy could be viewed as "stocking the pond." Adults in neighborhoods, schools, after-school programs, summer camps, competitive sports teams, and even online interest groups are often afforded ongoing opportunities to engage youth in the sorts of informal conversations and activities that can give rise to close bonds. And, just as Cowen found in his studies of informal supports, many youth actually prefer and benefit from a context in which caring adults are available but not necessarily assigned to them individually. Yet, in the absence of an intentional approach in which programs prioritize such relationships and youth workers leverage their influence when opportunities for mentoring arise, the potential of adults to forge meaningful connections with youth has not been fully realized (Ching, Santo, Hoadley, & Peppler, 2015). Even youth workers who are fully aware of their potential role and intuitively adept at forging ties may benefit from training in best practices that have been identified in the laboratory of formal mentoring programs (Schwartz, Chan et al., 2013).

Future Directions

Taken together, the models described above could dramatically expand the reach of mentoring. Similar shifts are also underway in workplace and academic mentoring where there is increasing recognition of the limitations of restricting mentoring to a single assigned relationship (Allard & Parashar, 2013; Ching et al., 2015; Murphy & Kram, 2014; Sánchez, Esparza, Berardi, & Pryce, 2011; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000;). In workplace mentoring, Ching et al. (2015), Murphy and Kram (2004), for example, have emphasized the importance of actively cultivating "mentor circles" which draw on a range of individuals from within one's social network. In academic mentoring too, students report relatively low levels of satisfaction with formal academic advisors when compared with unassigned or informal faculty advisors (Allard & Parashar, 2013). And, as the role of youth workers, teachers, professors, and co-workers expands to include more mentoring, programs and institutions will need to more explicitly recognize and incentivize this contribution.

These new approaches to mentoring interventions are in the early stages of development and currently lack the research base and the accumulated program wisdom of traditional mentoring programs. Research is needed to refine and identify the strengths and challenges of these and other new approaches and to evaluate their effects on a range of youth outcomes. No doubt, there will remain a need for the structure and support that high quality, one-on-one formal relationships and programs can afford, especially for younger children as well as youth who may not have the resources to recruit their own support. Formal mentoring may also provide an important stepping stone. By embracing these more community-oriented approaches, the field of youth mentoring has the potential to grow its reach and move toward a strength-based, empowering approach to promoting the well-being of young people.

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