

Natural Mentors: An Overlooked Resource in the Social Networks of Young, African American Mothers

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Studied the influence of natural mentors (i.e., supportive nonparent/nonpeer support figures) on the psychological adjustment of 129 young, African American mothers. Women with mentors reported lower levels of depression than those without mentors. In addition, both the amount of network support (excluding mentor support) utilized by women with mentors and their satisfaction with this support were negatively related to depression; those who utilized more support and were more satisfied with this support were less depressed. Problems with network members did not predict depression in this group. For women without mentors, both the amount of network support and satisfaction with this support were unrelated to depression. Moreover, those who reported greater problems in relationships from which they received intangible support, reported higher levels of depression. Mentors may help young mothers to make better use of their networks and serve as a buffer against the negative effects of relationship problems.

A growing body of literature suggests that natural mentors, or nonparent/nonpeer support figures, may contribute to the psychosocial adjustment of high-risk youth (Cowen & Work, 1988; Galbo, 1986; Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987). Werner and Smith (1982), for example, conducted a longitudinal study of children exposed to poverty and family instability and found that those who developed into competent and autonomous young adults showed an ability to locate an adult in addition to their parents for

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support. Werner noted that "Without exception, all the children who thrived had at least one person that provided them consistent emotional support—a grandmother, an older sister, a teacher, or neighbor" (cited in Goleman, 1987, p. C11). More recently, Rhodes and Jason (1990) found the presence of a supportive adult to be an important protective factor among low-income, minority youth. In the present study we sought to directly explore the characteristics and support functions of natural mentors in the lives of young, low-income, African American mothers.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Young African American mothers face a host of extremely difficult life stressors and are at heightened risk for psychological distress (Brown, Adams, & Kellam, 1981). In addition to the ongoing demands of parenthood, young mothers must cope with the various developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood (Panzarine, 1986). Moreover, African American mothers often face additional adversities resulting from racial oppression and economic hardship (Lindblad-Goldberg & Dukes, 1985; McLoyd, 1990; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Tucker, 1978; Wilson, 1987). Not surprisingly, these women often rely heavily on their social networks for needed support and assistance.

As a young mother's reliance on her family and friends increases, so too may her vulnerability to the problematic aspects of the relationships. Disputes about appropriate parenting and the young woman's life-style can easily arise in the sharing of child rearing responsibilities (Crockenberg, 1987; Furstenberg, 1980; Lindblad-Goldberg & Dukes, 1985). Likewise, the young woman's increased involvement with her mother and older kin can interfere with her normative developmental task of gaining autonomy from them. Young mothers have also indicated a host of problems associated with obtaining support from husbands and boyfriends. Problems ranging from difficulties trusting the male partner to unmet expectations, serious arguments, and physical and sexual assault have been identified (Belle, 1981; Boone, 1985; Colletta, 1981; Unger & Wandersman, 1985). Relationship problems such as these can be viewed as a form of chronic stress which can strongly influence the young woman's overall adjustment to life problems (Eckenrode & Gore, 1981; Fiore, Becker, & Coppel, 1983; Rook, 1984).

Natural mentors may act as an alternative source of support in this context, directly supplementing support and offsetting the problematic aspects of obtaining assistance from other network members. For example, the mentor might provide opportunities for the young mother to openly

discuss and interpret her relationship problems and enable her to be more selective in when she chooses to approach persons who are likely to be a source of distress. As the young mother's vulnerability to relationship problems decreases, the likelihood that she can elicit and appreciate the positive aspects of her social support network may increase.

PRESENT STUDY

Despite observations concerning the protective influence of mentor relationships, the underlying processes by which mentors contribute to adjustment have yet to be examined. Two distinct models may account for the positive influence of mentors. First, by providing helpful, unproblematic support, mentor relationships could directly lead to a sense of stability and self-worth. In this model, increases in mentor support would be directly associated with increases in well-being. Alternatively, mentor relationships could moderate the positive and negative influences of network support. Specifically, mentors might provide the necessary resources for youth to redefine and better cope with relationship problems and more effectively derive benefits from network support. This model suggests that mentors intervene between relationship problems and distress by influencing youth's appraisal of problems and enhancing their use of support.

In this preliminary study, we explored the role of mentors in promoting young mothers' well-being. We examined whether mentor support had a direct or a moderating effect on adjustment. If mentors were having a direct effect, we would expect to find associations between mentor support and improved levels of psychological adjustment. A moderating effect would be supported if mentors somehow facilitated the young women's capacity to derive benefits from their network support and/or offset the negative impact of relationship problems. This line of inquiry parallels the numerous studies that have sought to determine the mechanisms underlying the positive association between social support and well-being (cf. Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Within this context, we explored the influence of two general types of support—tangible and intangible support. These two broad categories are represented in most taxonomies of social support (Vaux, 1988) and may be related differentially to adjustment and problems. For example, because needed tangible support (e.g., money, child care) is often difficult to reciprocate, it may be associated with heightened problems and psychological costs (Crockenberg, 1987; Panzarine, 1986). The exchange of emotional support, on the other hand, may be more mutual and less problematic (Wellman, 1981).

METHOD

Procedure

A female African American research associate² recruited participants in two urban service agencies and conducted the assessments. Both agencies offer parenting, prenatal, and postnatal health information; one of the agencies also provides nutritional services. Women who fit the criteria for selection into the study (i.e., parenting, African American, aged 14–22) were contacted by agency personnel and asked if they could be contacted by the research associate. After consent was granted, the research associate telephoned or wrote the participants, explaining the procedures of the study and asking them if they would be willing to participate in an interview on the day of their scheduled visit to the agency. They were told that participation was confidential, voluntary, that transportation would be provided to and from the agency, and that they would receive \$20 for their involvement. All of the women who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. The initial interviews, the basis for the data reported here, lasted approximately 2 hours and were conducted at the service settings.³

Participants

One hundred twenty-nine African American women between the ages of 14 and 22 ($M = 18.07$, $SD = 2.79$) took part in the study (see Table I). Initial analyses indicated no differences between women at the two sites on background variables (i.e., age, number of children, living arrangements, educational attainment, and employment) and most of the women (87.5%) were receiving welfare benefits.

MEASURES

Social Support

Mentor Definition. The work of Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) is frequently cited in describing the complexities of informal mentor relationships and served as a basis for our definition of a

²We appreciate the persistent efforts of our Research Associate, the Reverend Annette Collins.

³The results reported here are part of a larger study, involving additional instruments and data collection beyond these initial interviews. These other data are forthcoming.

Table I. Participant Characteristics

	<i>n</i>	%
Marital status		
Never married	124	96.1
Married	2	1.5
Separated	3	2.4
Age (years)		
14–16	18	14.0
17–19	79	61.2
20–22	32	24.8
No. of children		
1	105	81.3
2	17	13.4
3	6	4.6
4	1	.7
School status		
Not in school	81	62.7
Full-time	41	31.8
Night school	7	5.5
Living arrangements		
Mother	53	41.0
Alone	22	17.0
Extended family	20	15.5
Both parents	19	14.8
Male partner/husband	15	11.7

natural mentor. We drew several features from their description to define the presence and support functions of mentoring relationships in our sample. First, participants were asked, "Other than your parents or whoever raised you, is there an older person in your life (a mentor, or positive role model) who you go to for support and guidance?" Four characteristics of the relationship were then listed as criteria for persons to be nominated as mentors. These included: "(1) that you could count on this person to be there for you (2) that he or she believes in and cares deeply about you, (3) that he or she inspires you to do your best, and (4) that knowing him or her has really affected what you do and the choices you make." Based on Levinson's definition, mentors who were fewer than 8 years older than the participant were excluded. Nine (6.9%) participants nominated mentors who did not fit this age criteria (e.g., similarly aged best friends or boy-friends). Similarly, mentors who were not later nominated on the Social Support Network Questionnaire as a potential source of support were also eliminated. Only six of the participants (4.6%) nominated mentors who did not later appear on the social support network (i.e., God, deceased relatives).

Social Support Network questionnaire (SSNQ). The SSNQ is a modification and extension of the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (ASSIS; Barrera, 1981). A total of six social support functions are included on the SSNQ; three intangible functions (emotional support, cognitive guidance, and positive feedback/social reinforcement), and three tangible functions (social participation, tangible assistance, and child care assistance). Participants were asked to nominate individuals from whom each type of support was elicited in the past month and their satisfaction with each type of support. The measure also assesses the problematic aspects of social ties (Rook, 1984, 1990). Specifically, from the list of members who were nominated as providing any of the six types of support, participants were asked if, and how often, each provider could be expected to be a source of disappointment (e.g., breaking promises, not coming through for them); intrusiveness (e.g., intruding into participants' private matters, bossing them around); criticism (e.g., putting them down); and conflict (e.g., having strong disagreements). Summary variables were created for this study including (a) amount of support (overall, intangible, and tangible), (b) satisfaction with support, (c) relationship problems, and (d) the interaction of amount of support and relationship problems. The amount of overall support was calculated as the total number of persons who were nominated as providing any of the six types of support assessed (each provider was only counted once). The amount of tangible support and intangible support was calculated as the sum of the number of persons nominated as providing each of the three types of support in the corresponding categories. The second variable, satisfaction with support, assessed how the participants felt about the way things went the times that they received each of the six types of support from their network members (on a 5-point scale ranging from *bad* to *very good*). Mean ratings of satisfaction with overall, intangible, and tangible support were used. The third variable, relationship problems, consisted of the sum of the mean negative ratings of disappointment, intrusiveness, conflict, and criticism. The interaction of support and problems represented the product of the amount of support and relationship problems.

Psychological Functioning

Symptom Checklist-90R (SCL-90-R) (Derogatis, 1983). The SCL-90-R is a 90-item self-report symptom inventory. Good levels of reliability have been found for this measure with alpha coefficients ranging from .77 to .90 and test-retest reliabilities for the scales ranging from .78 to .90 (Derogatis, 1983). The General Symptom Index (GSI) and the Depression, Anxi-

ety, and Somatization subscale scores were calculated from the total scale. The GSI combines information on number of symptoms and intensity of perceived distress. The Depression subscale consists of 13 items ($\alpha = .90$) and has a test-retest coefficient of .82. The Anxiety subscale consists of 10 items ($\alpha = .85$) and has a test-retest coefficient of .80. The Somatization subscale consists of 12 items ($\alpha = .86$) and has a test-retest coefficient .86 (Derogatis, 1983). The internal consistency of the scale in our sample was moderately low ($\alpha = .54$).

Stress

Economic Strain. Pearlin's Economic Strain Scale (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981) consists of 9 items designed to assess chronic economic problems such as difficulty paying bills, worrying about money, and not having enough money for medical care. Participants rated the frequency with which they experienced various types of economic strain. Responses were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from *never* to *always*. Pearlin et al. (1981) reported stable test-retest reliability (mean coefficient $r = .79$) and, in our sample, internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = .66$).

Life Stress. The Life Events Survey (LES); Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1979) is a 57-item self-report questionnaire adapted from the Schedule of Recent Life Events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). It assesses the occurrence, impact, and valence of major stressors/life events occurring in the past year (e.g., moving, divorce/death of parent). Events are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *extremely negative* (-2) to *extremely positive* (+2). Life stress consisted of the number of all negatively rated life events.

Parenting Stress. A shortened version of the Parental Stress Inventory (PSI): (Abidin, 1983) assesses stressors commonly associated with dysfunctional parenting. Participants responded to a series of five statements (e.g., my child gets upset easily over the smallest things), indicating their degree of agreement with each of the items on a 5-point scale. High scores on this scale indicate a mother-child system that is under stress and at risk for the development of dysfunctional parenting behaviors (e.g., misinterpreting child cues, feeling inadequate, depressed, or withdrawn as parent) or behavior problems in the child involved. Studies of the test-retest reliability of the PSI have shown coefficients ranging from .65 to .96 (Abidin, 1986). Internal consistency in our sample was adequate ($\alpha = .65$).

The Parental Stress Inventory was only modestly correlated with the Life Events Scale ($r = .28, p < .05$) and the Economic Strain Scale ($r =$

.19, $p < .05$). Correlations between the Life Events Scale and the Economic Strain Scale were not significant ($r = .05$, $p > .05$).

Background Information. A set of fixed-format questions was used to obtain information on participants' age, number of children, living arrangements, structure of family of origin, educational attainment, and employment.

RESULTS

Descriptive Summary

Of the 129 participants, 58 (45%) included in the study nominated mentors who fit our criteria (i.e., 8 or more years older and appearing on the social support network questionnaire). The various characteristics of these mentoring relationships are summarized in Table II. The remaining 71 participants either did not nominate mentors ($N = 56$) or nominated mentors who did not fit these criteria ($N = 15$).

Mentor Effects

To examine the influence of natural mentors, we compared women with natural mentors to those without natural mentors on the SCL-90-R GSI and subscales. Although no group differences were found on the GSI or the anxiety and somatization subscales, women with mentors scored lower on the depression scale than women without mentors ($t = 2.00$, $p < .05$) (Table III). Thus, the presence of a mentor in a mother's support network appears to be associated with lower levels of depression. All subsequent analyses were designed to test alternative explanations for this effect and to understand possible mediating processes.

It could be argued that the differences in depression were due to lower stress levels in the group with mentors. No group differences were found, however, on any of the stress measures. Both groups experienced similar levels of economic strain, life stress, and parenting stress. Along similar lines, it could be argued that having a mentor is simply a proxy indicator of higher social functioning, that is the ability to recruit a more supportive network. If this were the case, then differences in depression could be attributed less to the unique influence of the mentor than to the overall increased support resources of the group with mentors. A series of analyses were undertaken which revealed significant group differences in overall support and in both tangible and intangible support (Hotelling's T^2

Table II. Natural Mentor Characteristics^a

	<i>n</i>	%
Women	49	85
Boyfriends' relatives	12	20.7
Aunts	11	19.0
Older friends	10	17.2
Grandmothers	9	15.5
Older sisters	5	8.6
Teachers	5	8.6
Ministers	3	5.1
Counselors	2	3.7
Neighbors	1	1.6
Men	9	15
Older friends	3	30
Teachers	2	20
Uncles	2	20
Brothers	1	10
Neighbors	1	10
Frequency of interaction		
Seen daily	24	41.3
Seen at least 1/week	31	53.4
Seen < 1/week	3	5.1
Proximity to participant		
In neighborhood	31	53.4
Within 1 hour	26	44.8
More than 1 hour away	1	1.8
Provided support in the past month		
Emotional support	42	72.4
Cognitive guidance	46	79.3
Positive feedback	48	82.8
Tangible assistance	51	87.9
Child care assistance	38	65.5
Social participation	26	44.8
Perceived as		
unconflictual (supportive w/no problems)	52	89.7
Never/rarely source of		
Conflict	53	91.4
Criticism	53	91.4
Disappointment	50	86.2
Intrusiveness	36	61.8

^aAverage age = 45.4 years (*SD* = 14.6).

= 10.14, $F = 3.33$, $p < .05$). Post hoc analyses suggested that participants with mentors utilized significantly more support than did participants without mentors. When a Bonferroni correction was applied (overall error rate = .05) the differences in utilized tangible support were no longer significant.

Table III. Comparison of Mentor and No Mentor Groups on SCL-90-R Scales

SCL-90-R scale	No mentor (<i>M</i>)	Mentor (<i>M</i>)	<i>t</i>
Depression	1.00	0.76	2.0 ^a
Anxiety	0.61	0.53	0.82
Somatization	0.63	0.56	0.89
Global severity	0.86	0.70	1.74

^a*p* < .05.

The analyses were then repeated, this time with mentor support eliminated. Specifically, because we had separate indices of the support provided by each member of the social support network, we were able to remove mentor support and compare the two groups on the residual support. The residual support consisted of the total number of persons nominated as providing overall support, tangible support, and intangible support. If these tests were not significant, it would provide support for the hypothesis that the group differences were due, at least in part, to the presence of the mentor in the network.

When the mentor support was removed from the network, none of the group differences that had been significant in the previous analyses remained significant (Table IV). Taken together, these results suggest that having a mentor is not simply indicative of a more supportive overall network. In the absence of the mentor, the two groups do not differ with respect to levels of support (i.e., they had the same number of people available to provide support and were equally satisfied with that support).

Relationship Between Mentor Support and Depression

In next set of analyses, we sought to further understand the processes by which mentors may have influenced depression levels. One implication of the findings is that mentor support may directly contribute to lower levels of depression. A hierarchical multiple regression looking only at the group with mentors and the influence of mentor support was used to examine this possibility. Mentor support was entered, followed by ratings of the participants' satisfaction with this support. Neither amount of mentor support nor satisfaction with this support were related to depression.

A second model, which examined the possibility that mentors moderate the helpful and problematic aspects of obtaining social support, was then tested. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were run separately for women with and without mentors. These analyses excluded support

Table IV. Means, Standard Deviations, and *t* Ratios Comparing Participants with and without Mentors on Social Network Variables

Variable	Mentor	No mentor	Mentor (w/o mentor)	No mentor vs. mentor <i>t</i>	No mentor vs. mentor (w/o mentor) <i>t</i>
Total support					
<i>M</i>	7.12	5.85	6.10	2.86 ^a	0.60
<i>SD</i>	2.68	2.39	2.52		
Intangible support					
<i>M</i>	10.34	7.30	8.59	2.97 ^a	1.33
<i>SD</i>	6.96	4.65	6.37		
Tangible support					
<i>M</i>	10.93	9.08	9.50	2.09	0.49
<i>SD</i>	5.26	4.77	4.91		

^aOverall error rate $p < .05$ with Bonferroni correction.

from and problems experienced with the mentor. Neither living arrangements nor any of the demographic variables typically associated with psychological functioning in this population (i.e., number of children, age, education level) were related to depression, so they were not included in the regression. The results of these analyses are displayed in Tables V and VI, along with the correlations between each predictor and outcome variable. Full models, which included all six types of support are presented, along with trimmed models, which were restricted to either intangible or tangible support.

Looking first at the group with mentors, we see that satisfaction with overall support was significantly related to depression; women who were more satisfied with their network support were less depressed ($\beta = -.39$, $R^2\text{change} = .15$, $p < .01$). Utilized intangible support was significantly related to depression ($\beta = -.28$, $R^2\text{change} = .08$, $p < .05$) as was satisfaction with intangible support ($\beta = -.41$, $R^2\text{change} = .16$, $p < .01$). In contrast, as the amount of tangible support increased, depression increased ($\beta = .31$, $R^2\text{change} = .09$, $p < .01$). Finally, problems with network members and the interaction of support and problems were not associated with depression in this group.

For the group without mentors, a different pattern of effects emerged. The amount of total support, satisfaction with support, and the amount of intangible and tangible support were all unrelated to depression. In all three models, however, problems in relationships with network members were related to psychological functioning. In the intangible support model, those who reported greater problems with members of their social networks also reported higher levels of depression ($\beta = .43$, $R^2\text{change} = .17$, $p <$

Table V. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Mentor Group: Full and Trimmed Models

Predictor variable	Outcome variable: Depression					
	Full model: Six types support		Trimmed model: Intangible		Trimmed model: Tangible	
	β^a	R^2 change	β^a	R^2 change	β^a	R^2 change
Step 1: Amount of utilized support (no. of persons)	-.09	.01	-.28	.08 ^c	.31	.09 ^d
Step 2: Satisfaction with support	-.39	.15 ^d	-.41	.16 ^d	-.11	.01
Step 3: Relationship problems	.15	.013	.12	.013	.13	.01
Step 4: Support \times Problems	-.09	.01	.34	.001	.33	.04 ^b
Multiple <i>R</i> (Adj. <i>R</i>)	.41	(.32)	.51	(.40)	.39	(.31)

^aStandardized regression coefficients are reported for the step in which they are entered into the model.

^b $p < .10$.

^c $p < .05$.

^d $p < .01$.

.05). This trend approached significance in the overall and intangible support models.

DISCUSSION

This study is among the first to yield findings regarding the presence and underlying effects of natural mentors among youth exposed to high levels of stress. Many of the young mothers in our sample identified mentors, ranging from their boyfriends' relatives to grandmothers, aunts and uncles, older friends and sisters, teachers, church staff, counselors, and neighbors. Consistent with previous observations concerning cross-generational relationships in the African American community (Hill, 1971; Joseph & Lewis, 1981; Stack, 1974), the majority of these mentors were women. Older women who provide support and guidance to youth in the African American community have also been referred to as "othermothers" (extended kin) and community othermothers or "playmothers" (nonkin) (Collins, 1987; Troester 1984).

The young women in our sample all lived in close proximity to their mentors and the relatively large amount of mentor support was remarkably unconflictual. Moreover, women with natural mentors reported lower levels

Table VI. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for No-Mentor Group: Full and Trimmed Models

Predictor variable	Outcome variable: Depression					
	Full model: Six types support		Trimmed model: Intangible		Trimmed model: Tangible	
	β^a	R^2 change	β^a	R^2 change	β^a	R^2 change
Step 1: Amount of perceived support (no. of persons)	-.18	.03	-.16	.001	-.17	.03
Step 2: Satisfaction with support	-.13	.02	-.13	.017	-.10	.01
Step 3: Relationship problems	.26	.05 ^b	.43	.17 ^c	.22	.05 ^b
Step 4: Support \times Problems	.11	.04 ^b	1.0	.035	.11	.04 ^b
Multiple <i>R</i> (Adj. <i>R</i>)	.37	(.31)	.49	(.33)	.35	(.29)

^aStandardized regression coefficients are reported for the step in which they are entered into the model.

^b $p < .10$.

^c $p < .05$.

of depression than those without natural mentors. This is a particularly promising finding, given the close connection between the psychological well-being of young mothers and the emotional well-being of their children (Crockenberg, 1981; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978). No group differences were detected in levels of life stress, parental stress, or economic strain. Similarly, having a mentor was not simply a proxy for better social functioning; in the absence of the mentor, support resources were comparable across groups. Finally, the amount of mentor support and satisfaction with this support were not directly related to depression.

Instead, the presence of a mentor appeared to have two separate effects. First, mentors seemed to heighten the young women's capacity to benefit from their social networks. Specifically, for women with mentors, satisfaction with overall and intangible support and the amount of intangible support were negatively related to depression. Moreover, problems in these relationships were unrelated to depression. This overall pattern suggests that mentors might somehow serve as catalysts for extracting helpful support and buffers against the more stressful aspects of young mothers' relationships.

In contrast, depression was unrelated to levels of support among women without mentors (i.e., those with more support were not less depressed). Instead, as problems in relationships from which participants re-

ceived intangible support increased, depression levels increased. A similar trend was found with respect to overall and tangible support. These findings are consistent with previous research which has demonstrated that adjustment to life problems may actually be more strongly influenced by the negative aspects of social relationships than by the positive aspects (Barrera, 1981; Belle, 1982; Fiore et al., 1983; Rook, 1984). Thus, the negative pattern of problematic interactions and psychological distress that we see in this group may actually be more representative of the general population than the positive influence of support exhibited in the group with mentors. Clearly, these findings support the notion that negative and positive interactions are distinct dimensions and that their influence should be assessed separately (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986).

The results also provide strong support for the importance of distinguishing between types of support. Although aggregate measures showed some significant associations with depression, measures that distinguished the tangible from intangible support provided more specific information. For example, whereas intangible support was negatively related to depression in the group with mentors, the reverse was true with respect to tangible support. As the amount of tangible assistance increased, so too did the young women's depression. This positive association between utilized tangible support and depression may reflect a greater need for help in women who are more depressed.

For women with no mentors, both intangible and tangible support were unrelated to variations in depression levels. Relationship problems were positively related to depression in both the intangible and tangible models, with a stronger relationship detected in the intangible model. Overall, these findings suggest that the relationship between support and depression is influenced by the type of support provided as well as by the presence or absence of mentors in the network.

At this point, we can only speculate about the ways in which the mentor may act to moderate the helpful and problematic aspects of obtaining social support. Mentor relationships may provide relatively safe, unproblematic support and a context for young women to understand relationship problems. In the process, mentors may enhance young women's capacity to elicit and appreciate the positive aspects of their social support networks and more effectively cope with inevitable relationship problems.

Inferences of this nature can be strengthened through the use of longitudinal rather than concurrent data sets. Although appropriate for preliminary stages of investigation in an area, a cross-sectional design does not allow for definitive causal conclusions regarding the role of the mentor in moderating problematic support. For example, it is possible that certain youth may already be more adept at both seeking out mentor support and

at making better use of their support network. Similarly, having no mentor may be the result (rather than the cause) of depression—depressed women might somehow drive away potential supports (Henderson, Duncan-Jones, McAuely, & Ritchie, 1978; Rook, 1984).

The results must also be viewed in the context of a relatively small number of participants. In addition, the possibility of some response biases resulting from the reliance on self-report data from a single source must be considered. Future research in this area would be strengthened through the use of several assessment techniques. An approach that obtained multiple indicators of the focal variables (e.g., family, partner, and mentor evaluations of their relationships with participants, observation of these relationships) as well as the convergence of measures of associated dysfunction (e.g., vocational or academic difficulties) might be useful in this regard. Finally, researchers working with this population should consider developing more culturally sensitive measures of distress and functioning.

It will also be important to continue to refine the operational definition of natural mentor. Our definition was exploratory and, by necessity, somewhat arbitrary. Future studies should include convergent data for the existence of these relationships and evidence that they can be discriminated from other relationships in an individual's network. It is possible, for example, that rather than assessing the unique influence of a mentor, this study examined a particular pattern of support. That is, the moderating effects associated with the mentor relationship might be found with respect to any relationship that offered high support and few problems. If this were the case, then youth with at least one network member who provides a high level of unconflictual support may derive these buffering effects. In light of the growing interest in the problematic aspects of supportive relationships, as well as the central role prescribed to the mentor relationship in this study, it is important to investigate these issues further. Attempts should also be made to replicate these findings with other samples of young mothers as well as with youth who are exposed to a different range of stressors.

In addition to serving as an impetus for future research, these findings have implications for support interventions. The study provides indirect evidence for the potential value of programs that assign volunteer mentors to youth (e.g., Big Brothers–Big Sisters) and may offer suggestions as to the optimal role of the volunteers. For example, rather than attempting to substitute for problematic support figures, volunteer mentors might help to bolster youth's support skills within their social network (Heller, Thompson, Trueba, Hogg, & Vlachos-Weber, 1991). Mentors could teach young mothers strategies for minimizing the escalation of relationship problems or offsetting their deleterious effects.

Our findings regarding the role of natural mentors remind us of the complexity of the support process and the need to consider the context in which relationships are embedded. As we continue to search for protective factors, the influence of mentor relationships deserves further consideration.

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