

MENTOR RELATIONSHIPS AND THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF PREGNANT AND PARENTING AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEENAGERS

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The influence of natural mentor relationships on the career outlook of African-American pregnant and parenting teenagers was examined. More than half of the participants nominated adults they considered to be mentors. A path model indicated that mentor support was associated with increased life optimism, beyond its indirect effects on career activities and beliefs about the opportunity structure. These findings suggest that natural mentors are an important resource in the career development of pregnant and parenting African-American adolescents.

As young African-American women approach early adulthood and are increasingly confronted with economic, racial, and gender discrimination, their career aspirations may begin to diverge from their expectations of actually achieving their future goals (Kelly & Wingrove, 1975; Lee, 1984; Smith, 1982). This discrepancy becomes even more pronounced for pregnant and parenting adolescents who are faced with additional adversities stemming from inadequate child care and related stressors (Zabin & Hayward, 1993). Indeed, early parenting is associated with high rates of school dropout and long-term economic instability (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1989; Hayes, 1987).

It is important to note, however, that many young African-American

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mothers continue to achieve in school, work toward their career aspirations, and remain optimistic about the future (Ahn, 1994; Scott-Jones, Roland, & White, 1989; Upchurch & McCarthy, 1990). Understanding how and why some young women retain their optimism may be an important key to promoting the well-being of other pregnant and parenting teenagers.

One factor that may contribute to more positive outcomes among adolescents is the support of natural mentors. Natural mentoring relationships are generally characterized as powerful, supportive emotional ties between older and younger persons in which the older member is trusted, loving, and experienced in the guidance of others (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Merriam, 1983). Unlike assigned mentor relationships, which originate through programs such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, natural mentor relationships tend to emerge from within the youth's natural support network.

Adolescents who have adjusted well despite profound, ongoing stress often attribute their success to the influence of a natural mentor, such as a special aunt, grandparent, or teacher (Anderson, 1991; Lefkowitz, 1986; Williams & Kornblum, 1985). Anecdotal reports of mentors' protective qualities are corroborated by the literature on resilience, which has underscored the positive influence of nonparental adults in the lives of at-risk children and adolescents (Cowen & Work, 1988; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Garnezy, 1985; Rutter, 1990). Werner and Smith (1982), for example, conducted a longitudinal study of children exposed to poverty and family instability and found that all of the children who thrived had at least one adult support figure who provided them with consistent emotional support.

Studies of African-American kinship networks have also recognized the importance of these intergenerational ties (Hill, 1972; Taylor, Casten, & Flickinger, 1993; Wilson, 1986). Collins (1987), for example, has described the role of older, African-American women in the lives of urban youth, referring to them as "othermothers." These relationships often extend beyond the boundaries of biologically related extended families to include the support of "fictive" kin and "community othermothers" (Collins, 1987; Stack, 1974; Troester, 1984).

Natural mentor relationships appear to be extremely important to young African-American mothers, who may be particularly receptive to nonparent adult support and guidance (Hayes, 1987). By relying on nonparent adults, adolescent mothers can gain some autonomy while simultaneously obtaining much needed emotional support and advice (Allen, Aber, & Leadbeater, 1990; Rhodes, Contreras, & Mangelsdorf, 1994). Rhodes, Ebert, and Fischer (1992) for example, found that African-American adolescent mothers who identified natural mentors derived more benefits from their social networks and reported lower levels of depression than

those who did not, despite comparable levels of support, stress, and economic strain.

In addition to promoting psychosocial functioning, natural mentors might also facilitate young mothers' educational and career development (Carden, 1990; Taylor, 1989). Mickelson (1990), for example, has suggested that significant adults play an important role in influencing African-American adolescents' beliefs about the relationship between educational attainment and future occupational opportunities. In doing so, mentors may facilitate young mothers' school achievement and involvement in career-related activities (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Flaxman, 1993; Gilbert & Rossman, 1992; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1990). Similarly, Levinson et al. (1978) have suggested that mentors help their protégés to define their "Dream," or vision of the future, and instill a sense of optimism about actually realizing this future dream.

Of course, these protective effects may depend on the nature of the relationship. Mentor relationships appear to differ greatly in terms of their intensity, content, and activities (Furano, Roaf, Styles, & Branch, 1993; Greim, 1992). Whereas some mentors and protégés focus on issues related to academic and career development, others are more oriented toward interpersonal problems (Freedman, 1993; Kram, 1983; Levinson et al., 1978). The effects of mentoring are likely to vary as a function of relationship characteristics.

This study was designed to explore the extent to which natural mentors were associated with positive educational and career outcomes in pregnant and parenting African-American adolescents. Path analysis was used to explore the direct and indirect associations among the support and intensity of mentor relationships and adolescents' career beliefs and activities. Based on the literature cited above, it was hypothesized that mentor support would be directly associated with increased life optimism. It was also hypothesized that mentor support would indirectly predict life optimism through its influence on participants' career beliefs, activities, expectations, and aspirations.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from an alternative school for pregnant and parenting students, located in a large midwestern city. Two hundred and four African-American adolescents between the ages of 11 and 19 years ($M = 15.9$, $SD = 1.5$) took part in this study. Sixty-one percent of the young women were expecting their first child, 34% had one child, and 5% had

two or more children. None of the young women were ever married and more than half (66.2%) were directly receiving welfare benefits.

Procedures

An attempt was made to interview every student who was enrolled in the school during the 1992–1993 academic year. The research associate, an African-American woman, met with students and their parents during an intake interview and explained the procedures of the study. They were told that participation was voluntary, that information was confidential, and that they would receive \$10.00 for their involvement. All students who were contacted agreed to participate in the study, and the informed consent of the participants and their parents was obtained. The interviews lasted approximately 2 hours and were conducted at the school.

Measures

Mentor Support

The literature on mentoring (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Merriam, 1983) served as a basis for our definition of mentoring relationships and our conceptualization of mentor support in our sample (Rhodes et al., 1992, 1994). Participants were first asked, "Other than your parents or whoever raised you, do you have a role model or mentor who you go to for support and guidance. A mentor is not someone around your age or a boyfriend. He or she is an adult who is older than you, who has had more experience than you, and who has taken a special interest in you." Several characteristics of the mentor relationship were then listed, including: "(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, (5) that he or she is a model for the kind of person you would like to be, and (6) that he or she is a model for the kind of career successes you would like to have. Participants who nominated mentors were also asked to rate the importance of the relationship and to evaluate the relationships on the characteristics, ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a huge amount*. Mentor support refers to the summed scores across each of these characteristic variables. Participants who did not assign an average score of at least 3 (some) to the mentor support items were not included in subsequent analyses ($N = 9$). The internal consistency of the seven-item scale was moderately high in our sample ($\alpha = .80$).

The Aspiration–Expectation Gap

This variable consisted of the discrepancy between participants' occupational aspirations and their actual expectations for the future (Lee, 1984).

Occupational aspiration was defined as the response to the open-ended question, "If you were completely free to choose any job, what job would you like most as a lifetime job?" Occupational expectation was defined as the response to the open-ended question "When you think of your life, what job do you think you will be doing when you are thirty years old?" Aspiration and expectation responses were coded according to The Dictionary of Holland Occupational Codes (Gottfredson & Holland, 1989). Each response was assigned two scores. The first score, the General Education Development (GED) rating, which ranges from 1 to 6, indicated the educational development and reasoning skills typically required for the named occupation (1—requiring some elementary school and common sense understanding, 6—requiring college, logic, and abstract thinking). The second score, the Specific Vocational Preparation (SVP) rating, which ranges from 1 to 9, indicated the training time required for the named occupation (1—only a short demonstration, 9—more than 10 years of training). The GED and SVP ratings were added together to create individual's scores for the Aspiration and Expectation responses. Finally, the expectation score was subtracted from the aspiration score to determine the Aspiration-Expectation Gap.

Career Related Activities

Participants were asked whether they were presently doing things to help them get the job or career that they wanted. Responses were coded as a binary variable and labeled either as "no career activity" or "some career activity." The latter categorization was defined by a positive response to one or more of the following activities: (a) "taking vocational courses that relate to this job," (b) "taking courses that prepare me to continue my studies in college," (c) "holding a job right now that relates to my future job choice," and/or (d) "doing volunteer work that relates to my future job choice."

Opportunity Structure Beliefs

The Scale of Concrete Beliefs About the Opportunity Structure (Mickelson, 1990) was employed to assess the degree to which participants believed that education would lead to opportunities for individuals like themselves in their communities (e.g., studying in school rarely pays off later with good jobs, minorities are not always paid or promoted according to their education). The wording on some of the items was slightly modified to increase its appropriateness for the population being studied. The six items on the questionnaire were worded alternatively in negative or positive terms to avoid a response set (Mickelson, 1990). The scale scores used in the data analysis represent the sums of all of the answered items. Higher scores indicate more positive beliefs. The internal consistency of the six-item scale was low in our sample ($\alpha = .29$), suggesting that the individual items tended to capture different attitudes and beliefs about the opportunity structure. Applying a Spearman-Brown correction

for attenuation (cited in Allen & Yen, 1979) yielded an alpha coefficient of .55.

Life Optimism

Life Optimism was measured by the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985). The LOT consists of eight items designed to assess general outcome expectancies, plus four filler items that were included to disguise the underlying purpose of the test. Of the eight items, four were keyed in a positive direction and four were keyed in a negative direction. The wording on some of the items was slightly modified to increase its appropriateness for the participants. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the items on a five-point Likert scale response format, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The internal consistency of this scale in our sample was moderately low (Cronbach's $\alpha = .49$). Applying the Spearman-Brown correction (cited in Allen & Yen, 1979) yielded an alpha coefficient of .74.

RESULTS

One hundred and eighteen of the participants (57.8%) nominated adults whom they considered to be mentors. Nearly half (46.3%) of the young women had known their mentors for at least 15 years and more than 80% expected to maintain the relationship forever. Nearly a third (32%) of the young women nominated aunts and more than a quarter (25.7%) nominated grandmothers. Mentors also included older relatives, godmothers, teachers, counselors, and boyfriends' relatives. Nearly half (47.7%) of the participants reported that they saw their mentors daily, and an additional 48% reported that they saw their mentors at least once a week (see Table 1).

Pearson product-moment correlations were obtained to determine the associations between mentor support and career activities, beliefs about the opportunity structure, the gap between aspirations and expectations, and life optimism. Mentor support was significantly associated with participants' involvement in activities related to their career goals, more positive beliefs about the opportunity structure, and heightened optimism (see Table 2).

Contrary to expectations, mentor support was not associated with diminished discrepancies between participants' aspirations and their expectations. In fact, 66% of the participants ($n = 135$) reported expectations that were equal to their aspirations. Only 27% ($n = 56$) of the young women reported occupational expectations that were lower than their aspirations. The majority of participants envisioned professional careers, many of which were related to health or social service provision.

The associations between mentor support and participants' career activities, beliefs about the opportunity structure, and aspiration-expectations,

Table 1
Natural mentor characteristics

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>%</i>
Relationship to participant	
Aunts	32.1
Grandmothers	25.7
Godmothers	7.3
Teachers	6.4
Older cousins	5.5
Neighbors	5.5
Counselors	4.6
Boyfriends' relatives	4.6
Older sisters	4.6
Grandfathers, uncles, brothers	3.7
Frequency of interaction	
Daily	47.7
At least once a week	47.9
Less than once a week	7.4
Proximity to participant	
Same neighborhood	46.8
Within 1 hr away	46.8
More than 1 hr away	6.4

as well as associations between these variables, mentor support, and life optimism, were then examined using path analysis. Figure 1 presents the findings of the path analysis, including the standardized path coefficients. With one exception (mentor support to the aspiration-expectation gap) all of the paths were significant at $p < .05$. Overall goodness-of-fit is suggested by the nonsignificant $\chi^2(2, N = 109) = 1.73, p = .60$. The goodness-of-fit index and the adjusted goodness-of-fit index were each .99,

Table 2
Variable intercorrelations for young women with mentors

	<i>Opportunity Structure Beliefs</i>	<i>Mentor Support</i>	<i>Aspiration- Expectation Gap</i>	<i>Career Acts</i>
Life Optimism	.23*	.33**	-.30*	.29**
Opportunity Structure Beliefs	—	.24**	.09	.02
Mentor Support		—	.10	.32**
Aspiration- Expectation gap			—	.07

Note: $N = 118$ for all correlations.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

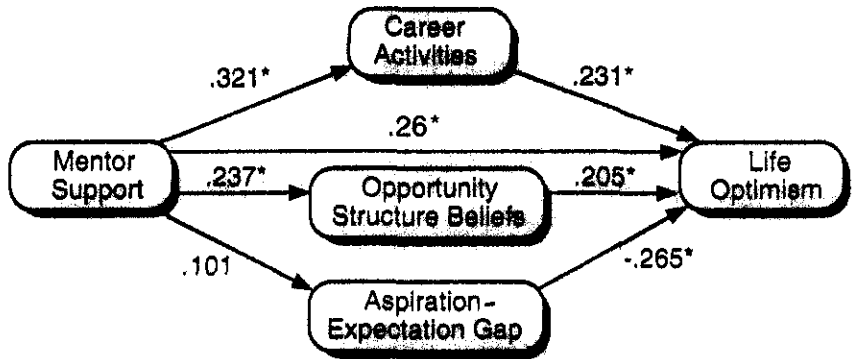


FIGURE 1. Path analysis for mentor support, career activities, opportunity structure beliefs, the aspiration–expectation gap, and life optimism. * $p < .05$.

indicating a good fit of the model to the data, and $R^2 = .968$. The total effect of mentor support on life optimism was .326 ($p < .05$) and the root mean square residual was .032.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide further evidence that natural mentors are an important protective resource for pregnant and parenting, African-American adolescents. In addition to promoting emotional well-being, natural mentor support may influence young mothers' educational and career development.

A path model suggested that the support of mentors was positively related to participants' increased life optimism as well as their participation in career-related activities and beliefs that education would lead to future jobs. Furthermore, participation in career-related activities and the belief that education would lead to opportunities were each positively related to increased optimism. Taken together, the model suggests that mentor support may increase life optimism, both directly and through its influence on participants' career-related activities and beliefs in education as a link to opportunity.

Contrary to expectations, mentor support was not associated with diminished discrepancies between the young women's career aspirations and their expectations of the future. This may have been caused, in part, by the limited variance in participants' responses. Although past studies have yielded substantial discrepancies, two thirds of the women in our sample experienced no gap between their aspirations and expectations. It may have been difficult for the young women, who were struggling with immediate stressors such as pregnancy, parenthood, and poverty, to envision a

future career or even being 30 years old. Indeed, Garbarino (1994) has described the sense of a "foreshortened future" among many inner-city youth.

Although the limited number of participants exhibiting gaps between their aspirations and expectations prohibits subsequent between-group analyses, important questions regarding this construct remain. One might expect, for instance, that age or parity would have some bearing on the adolescents' perceptions of the future (e.g., older teenagers' responses might reflect more realistic appraisals of options and constraints). Research that examines the ways in which young women at various developmental stages construct their future goals is needed.

Given the exclusive reliance on cross-sectional, self-report measures, our results must be interpreted with caution. It is possible that certain youth, by virtue of a more positive response set, may have been more inclined to nominate natural mentors and to provide positive appraisals of their career prospects. It also remains to be seen whether natural mentor support is associated with actual educational and occupational outcomes. Similarly, our design does not permit definitive conclusions regarding the direction of associations among the variables. Future research in this area would be strengthened through the use of a longitudinal design and additional assessment techniques. An approach that employs objective indices of academic and career functioning would be useful in this regard.

It will also be important to continue to refine the operational definition of natural mentor. Our definition was exploratory and should be further developed through in-depth interviews with teenagers and their mentors. Future studies should include convergent data for the existence of these relationships and evidence that they can be discriminated from other significant relationships in an individual's network.

It should also be noted that the opportunity structure and life optimism scales demonstrated low internal consistency in this study. Although Mickelson (1990) originally obtained adequate internal consistency on the opportunity structure scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .67$), she did so with a heterogeneous sample of more than 1,000 high school students. Our low internal consistency may have been a function of the limited number of items on the scale ($N = 6$) and a relatively small and homogenous sample. Additional items that directly assessed the beliefs and experiences of pregnant and parenting adolescents might have improved the internal consistency of the measure in this study.

Similarly, the relatively low internal consistency of the LOT may reflect the limited number of items ($N = 8$), the content of the items, and the bidimensional nature of the scale (Chang, D'Zurilla, & Maydeu-Olivares, 1994). A two-factor approach that distinguishes optimism from pessimism may correct for this limitation in future work. More generally, although the questions on both scales were modified slightly and administered through interviews with an African-American woman, the items on the

scales may have remained somewhat insensitive to the participants' experiences. Additional items that directly address the interacting influences of racism, poverty, and early motherhood on young women's future outlook might improve the validity of the scales in this population.

In addition to serving as the basis for future research, these results have implications for interventions with young women of color. The findings provide indirect evidence for the potential value of programs that pair volunteer mentors with at-risk adolescents. Like natural mentors, adults serving in this capacity might be able to offer inner-city youth some protection against the many stressors in their lives. Similarly, pregnant and parenting adolescents might be taught techniques for recruiting the support of natural mentors in their own social networks. Encouraging adolescents to reach out to supportive adults, while also providing such adults with the time and incentives to informally interact with youth, might go a long way toward facilitating intergenerational contact.

Of course, mentor relationships should not be expected to counter all of the stressors in young, pregnant and parenting African-American women's lives. The well-being of the young women strongly depends on factors such as adequate health care, child care, and educational and employment opportunities, all of which are in need of considerable improvement. Nonetheless, we should not minimize the potentially protective influence of natural mentors in the lives of inner-city teenagers. Moreover, our attempt to understand the strengths and support resources of pregnant and parenting African-American teenagers stands in refreshing contrast to more typical deficit-oriented approaches.

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