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Older and Wiser: Mentoring Relationships in Childhood and Adolescence

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Mentor relationships have been identified as contributing to resilience in high-risk youth. Despite their promise, as well as a recent increase in volunteer mentoring programs, our understanding of mentor relationships rests on a base of observational data and very few empirical studies. Literature in several fields is reviewed and synthesized as it bears on mentoring. Although the literature converges on the importance of mentor relationships in shaping and protecting youth, many programmatic and conceptual issues remain unresolved. These issues constitute a compelling research agenda for this emerging field.

KEY WORDS: Mentoring; resilience; social support.

> "More than the apple of her eye, Annie adored me. Her love was like having Santa Claus as your teacher every day, full of smiles, roundness, wisdom, globs of fat and 100 percent full fantasy . . . . We did nothing extra special and yet, we did everything language permitted" (Kesho Scott, 1987, p. 37).

To feel adored and supported by someone like Annie, an inner-city Detroit woman, must have an enormous influence on the social development of children and adolescents. Indeed, a sparse but growing body of literature suggests that supportive older adults, or mentors, ranging from neighbors and teachers to extended kin, may contribute to resilience among youth who are living in developmentally hazardous settings. For example, Williams and Kornblum (1985) followed 900 low-income, urban youth, and identified mentors as an extremely important factor in predicting the youth's healthy outcomes. Similarly, Werner & Smith (1982) conducted a 30 year study of 700 high-risk children and found that those who succeeded

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showed an ability to locate an adult in addition to their parents for support. They concluded 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" (Werner, 1987, p. C11). More recently, Rhodes, Ebert, & Fischer (1992), found natural mentors to be an important resource in the social networks of young, African-American mothers. Those women with natural mentors were less depressed than those without. The mentors appeared to facilitate the young women's social interactions and serve as a buffer against the negative aspects of interpersonal relationships.

Given their apparent benefits, efforts have been made to replicate these natural helping relationships through volunteer mentoring programs for at-risk youth. Hundreds of mentoring programs, essentially modelled after the Big Brothers/Big Sisters prototype, have emerged in the past few years. The programs target a wide range of youth (e.g., pregnant teenagers, disabled youth, African-American males, youth at risk for high school drop out), pairing them with a diversity of volunteers (e.g., community members, executives, the elderly, teachers, peer leaders) (Freedman, 1992; Rhodes, in press). Because such programs do not depend on extensive resources and are a natural extension of helping relationships, they may represent a cost-effective and culturally-sensitive approach to prevention and intervention with youth (Blechman, 1992, Hamilton, 1990).

Despite the promise of these natural helping relationships, as well as the recent growth in volunteer programs, our understanding of mentoring with at-risk youth rests on a base of observational data and very few empirical studies. Most of the empirical work on mentoring has been conducted in adult career and academic contexts (Bolton, 1980; Carden, 1990; Healy & Welchert, 1990; Kram, 1985; Merriam, 1983). As interest in mentoring programs with at-risk youth continues to grow, it will be important to carefully examine mentoring in both informal and formalized contexts .

This article synthesizes relevant literature on mentor relationships among children and adolescents. Literature on social support and resilience will be briefly reviewed, followed by a discussion some of the conceptual and programmatic issues surrounding mentoring. Although far from exhaustive, this synthesis provides a useful foundation from which to build a theoretical framework for this rapidly emerging field.

A necessary starting point is a shared understanding of the term mentor. Although the definition has varied across settings and investigations (Carden, 1990; Healy & Welchert, 1990), the term mentoring has generally been used to describe a relationship between an older, more experienced mentor and an unrelated, younger protegee. The mentor typically provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the

competence and character of the protegee. Over the course of the relationship, the mentor and protegee develop a special bond of mutual commitment, respect, and loyalty which facilitates the youth's transition into adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Freedman, 1988, 1992).

Freedman (1988) described mentor relationships among youth and drew distinctions between two types of bonds, primary and secondary. Primary mentor bonds are characterized by extraordinary commitment, intensity, and the expression of both positive and negative emotions. Secondary mentor bonds are often described as helpful neighborliness, distinguished by more limited, emotionally-distant supportive involvement and a focus on tasks. These bonds can be considered two end points on a continuum. The more intensive, natural (i.e., unassigned) mentoring relationships are of particular interest in this review.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Social Support

Although research interest in mentoring relationships is relatively new, social support researchers have long underscored the psychological benefits of natural helping relationships (Caplan, 1964; Cassel, 1976; Vallence, & D'Augelli, 1982). Caplan (1964, p. 49) discussed the importance of intimate, nonprofessional caregivers or "extrafamilial helping figures . . . such as older people with a reputation for wisdom." He argued that such people are much closer to the individual in need both "geographically and sociologically" than professional caregivers. They occupy a position between the latter and the family member and are generally far more likely than the professional to be called on for support. Others have also noted that, particularly among low-income groups, informal caregivers are the prime sources of help when personal troubles develop (Alley, Blanton, & Feldman, 1979; Cowen, 1982; Langner and Michael, 1963).

Several researchers have focused specifically on the social networks of children and adolescents and have examined the prevalence of youth's relationships with non-parental adults (Bryant, 1985; Coates, 1987; Galbo, 1986). Garbarino, Burston, Raber, Russell, & Crouter (1978), for example, found that non-parental adults comprised 22.3% of all persons listed by adolescents as significant others. Similarly, Blyth, Hill, & Theil (1982) found that non-parental adults comprised 25.8% of male adolescents' network and 27.2% of female adolescents' networks. These relationships served an important role in providing both emotional and tangible support.

Williams and Kornblum (1985) underscored the importance of these non-parental adult helpers in the lives of inner city youth. They found that youth generally fall into two categories: those who will make it despite their disadvantages and those who will end up on the streets, either on welfare, or in jail. They suggest that most urban youth are in the middle; depending on the influences to which they are exposed, they could become successful or they could engage in a life of crime or unemployment. The authors conclude that one of the key differences between successful and unsuccessful youth from lower-income urban communities is that the successful ones have mentors. Similarly, Lefkowitz (1986) and Anderson (1991) found supportive adults to be a vital protective influence on at-risk youth.

Resilience

Investigators of resilience also provide evidence for the importance of youth's ties with non-parental adults. Their research has focused on uncovering protective factors, or those traits, conditions, and situations that appear to enable at-risk children to achieve healthy outcomes despite profound stressors (Cowen & Work, 1988; Luthar & Zigler, 1991). Consistently, three clusters of protective factors have been recognized as favoring resilience in extremely stressed youth: (1) personal predispositions in the child, such as activity level, social responsiveness, autonomy in infancy and early childhood; (2) a family environment characterized by cohesion, closeness, and support; and (3) the presence of extrafamilial sources of support, including identification models or mentors (i.e., teachers, clergy, neighbors) (Masten & Garmezy; 1985; Werner, 1990). Although the influence of the first two factors in this "triad of protective factors" (Garmezy, 1985, p. 227) has been fairly well established, remarkably little research has been conducted on the protective qualities of the third factor, particularly adult role models or mentors. Nonetheless, the research consistently points to their prominence as protective factors.

Garmezy & Neuchterlein (1972) conducted an extensive review of the literature to uncover the attributes of competent, black children raised in inner-city neighborhoods. Several of the studies they reviewed indicated that "there was at least one adequate significant adult who was able to serve as an identification figure. In turn, the achieving youngsters seemed to hold a more positive attitude toward adults and authority figures in general" (Garmezy, 1983, p. 220). He subsequently reviewed the literature of children in war, looking at studies of the adaptation of the children in World War II and the children of Ireland and Israel. In addition to parents, the studies pointed to the significance of nonfamilial adults as prime factors

in how children responded to the stress of war. He observed that, "Such adults provide for the children a representation of their efficacy and the demonstrable ability to exert control in the midst of upheaval. From that standpoint, the sense of confidence in the adult community provides a support system of enormous importance to the wellbeing of children" (Garmezy, 1983, pg. 227).

In a series of epidemiological studies in Great Britain, Rutter identified factors which potentiate and reduce risk for psychiatric disorder in children (Rutter, 1979; 1987). He concluded that children with "one good relationship" were less likely to develop conduct disorders than other children in similar homes whose relationships with both parents were poor. Rutter and Giller (1983) also cited findings by Robins et. al (1975) who found that black children of low income, divorced or separated parents, were less likely to drop out of school if influenced by grandparents. In these circumstances, the extended family appeared to provide continuity and support. These findings led Rutter & Giller (1983, p. 237) to speculate about the importance of situations . . . "where good relationships outside the family can have a protective effect similar to that which apparently stems from within the immediate family."

Werner and Smith (1982), in their longitudinal study of children on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, came to similar conclusions. Compared to their peers, resilient youth more often sought support from non-parental adults. They found that the three most frequently encountered extrafamilial supports were the teachers, ministers, and neighbors. These adaptive models and supports were seen as influential in fostering resilience.

CONCEPTUAL AND PROGRAMMATIC ISSUES

Despite this converging evidence for the importance of mentor relationships, many questions remain concerning their underlying influence. It is unclear, for example, whether strong parental bonds predict or discourage the formation of mentoring relationships, i.e., the extent to which mentors serve a compensatory or supplementary function. Most researchers seem to suggest that mentor relationships compensate for the absence of strong parental bonds. Werner & Smith (1982, p. 31), for example, described the figure as a substitute or auxiliary parent. Similarly, Ainsworth (1989, p. 711), saw these relationships as "parent surrogates to whom they [children] become attached and who play an important role in their lives, especially in the case of children who find in such relationships the security they could not attain with their own parent."

Others imply that mentor relationships serve a supplemental support function. That is, youth who have had good relationships with parents may have greater confidence and trust in extrafamilial adults, as well as the skills for seeking them out. As they reduce their dependence on family members, these youth may find more specialized role models to supplement the support that they have been successfully receiving at home. Levinson, et al. (1978) supports this position, suggesting that mentors synthesize characteristics of the parent-child relationship and peer support without being either.

These distinctions raise a related issue concerning the direction of the relationship's influence. Specifically, it is unclear whether mentor relationships actually promote resilience, or if resilience and having a mentor are both proxy indicators of some third underlying factor. As implied above, a mentor relationship may be a critical, causal factor in stress resistance. Alternately, certain youth may already be resistant and thus more adept at actively seeking out the support that they need. Although some researchers imply that the mentor is an essential protective factor, others would consider the predisposition and instrumentality of the youth. Werner & Smith (1982, p. 31), for example, appear to place the emphasis on the resilient youth, i.e., they are "good at recruiting." Similarly, in their longitudinal study of resilience, White, Kaban, & Attanuci (1979) concluded that socially competent children were successful in gaining the positive attention of adults and used adults well as models and resources.

Several issues also remain concerning the design and implementation of mentoring interventions. First, questions regarding the optimal professional involvement and mode of training for volunteer mentors need to be considered. To date, most mentoring programs have provided only limited training and have imposed few constraints on the content of the mentor-protege relationships (Freedman, 1992; Rhodes & Englund, in press). Some might contend that mentors in both formal and informal contexts could enhance their positive influence by systematically integrating mental health principles. Others might question the wisdom of disrupting the natural helping processes within the relationship (Rappaport, 1977).

It will also be important to explore the possible iatrogenic effects of assigned mentoring programs. In the wake of growing public enthusiasm for mentoring programs, their potential downside is often ignored. Programs are sometimes implemented with insufficient planning, infrastructure, and follow-up (Freedman, 1992). Yet, even in carefully conceived programs, the actual mentoring process can be extremely complex and failed relationships often lead to hurt and disappointment. Moreover, mentors are sometimes assigned to youth with little consideration of how they may be perceived and integrated within the youth's preexisting social network. In the absence of sensitivity and open communication, other provid-

ers may feel threatened or usurped by an assigned mentor. Strategies for facilitating sensitive, high quality program development should be identified and tested.

It will also be important to carefully examine our assumptions concerning the nature of mentoring relationships. Specifically, a persistent assumption underlying assigned mentoring relationships is that they are analogous to natural mentoring; i.e., that the availing elements of a natural mentor relationship are contained in assigned relationships. It is reasonable to speculate, however, that there are several qualitative differences in the two types of relationships. For example, whereas natural mentor relationships typically emerge from within the youth's social support network, assigned mentor relationships tend to be grafted onto the extant network. These and other differences are likely to influence the nature and course of the mentor relationship. As mentoring interventions continue to emerge, it will be essential to compare assigned to natural mentor relationships (Rhodes, Reyes, & Jason, 1993).

A precondition for such comparisons, however, will be carefully conceived prospective research designs. To date, most studies of mentoring have relied on retrospective accounts from proteges who have sought out mentoring programs (Carden, 1990). As such, our ability to draw confident conclusions regarding the effects of mentoring programs remains quite limited. Where participants have been compared to non-participants, it has been difficult to determine whether the differences in the effects of mentoring programs were more the result of self-selection (reflecting underlying motivational differences) than actual intervention effects. Rhodes (in press) is attempting to control for this potential bias in a school-based, longitudinal study of natural and assigned mentors. Any student who does not already have a mentor will be randomly assigned to either mentor or a control condition.

Prospective designs will also provide the basis for a more systematic matching of mentors with proteges. Baseline measures and qualitative data could be used to isolate factors that are predictive of relationship success. Similarly it would be interesting to examine how variations in the characteristics of the mentor and protege (e.g., stressors, class, race, gender) affect the relationship.

Finally, the personal and contextual factors that motivate mentors should be examined, along with any benefits that mentors may derive from the relationship. This course of inquiry is driven by Reissman's (1965) helper-therapy concept, i.e., that people help themselves through the process of being genuinely helpful to others. This principle has special relevance for the indigenous people who typically volunteer for mentor programs. The sense of efficacy that derives from mentoring may well be a driving

force in the positive changes commonly observed in the mentors' lives (Rhodes & Englund, in press). Although most discussions of mentoring acknowledge such benefits to the mentor, it is typically viewed as an unexpected by-product. More recently, researchers have begun to recognize mutual benefit as integral to the relationship (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Burgoyne & Kelly, 1991; Maton, 1990).

Both natural and assigned mentors have the potential to modify, or even reverse, the developmental trajectories of at-risk youth. Given these benefits, mentoring is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers and practitioners. Still, many questions remain concerning the direction and effects of mentors' influence. These questions constitute an important research agenda.

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