

“It’s Not What I Expected”

A Qualitative Study of Youth Mentoring Relationship Failures

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Although estimates are that only about half of youth mentoring relationships established through formal programs last beyond a few months, almost no attention has been paid to understanding mentoring relationship failures. In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with 20 adult and 11 adolescent male and female participants in a community-based one-to-one mentoring program whose relationships ended early. Line-by-line coding and a narrative approach to a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded six salient factors that contributed to the demise of these mentoring relationships: (a) mentor or protégé abandonment, (b) perceived lack of protégé motivation, (c) unfulfilled expectations, (d) deficiencies in mentor relational skills, including the inability to bridge cultural divides, (e) family interference, and (f) inadequate agency support.

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The appeal of youth mentoring programs seems boundless. These programs have enjoyed tremendous growth in recent years, and the number of new programs being established remains on the rise (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). Discussions of mentoring tend to center on the poignant and often powerful stories of how the presence of a supportive adult made all the difference in a young person’s life. Such tales help to raise funds for programs and recruit volunteer mentors. The untold story is what happens when these

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relationships do not go well. General estimates are that only about half of the mentoring relationships established through formal programs last beyond a few months (Rhodes, 2002), and some research indicates that when these relationships end within the first 3 months they may have the potential to do harm (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Karcher, 2005). Yet, to date almost no attention has been paid to understanding relationship failures. This is surprising given the consideration of this issue in the literatures on other types of mentoring relationships, such as those formed in the workplace (e.g., Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Scandura, 1998) and in higher education settings (e.g., "Johnson & Huwe" 2002).

The enthusiasm for youth mentoring is not without some cause. The association between strong relationships with supportive adults and a range of positive social and emotional outcomes among vulnerable youth has been well-documented (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Community-based youth mentoring programs attempt to create such connections by matching youth living in single-parent homes or from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., low-income) with an unrelated adult in the hope that a caring and supportive relationship will develop. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that mentoring programs can foster connections that do promote positive outcomes in youth, such as better emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Rhodes, 2002). However, a meta-analysis of outcome research on mentoring programs found that, on average, improvements among the youth who received mentoring were modest at best (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). These benefits tended to increase when programs provided a variety of supports for the mentoring relationships, when the quality of the relationships was higher (evidenced by emotional closeness, frequency of contact and longevity), and when the youth entered programs with some type of environmental risk (e.g., low socioeconomic status) rather than individual risk (e.g., academic difficulties).

However, there has been little to no discussion of mentoring relationships that do not make it, despite the frequency with which this occurs. When mentoring relationship failures or negative experiences are discussed, it is often in the service of making a point about what distinguishes successful relationships (e.g., Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). This proclivity for the positive pervades the literature on interpersonal relationships more generally (Duck, 1994). Yet negative experiences, such as conflict, disappointment, and regret, are a fundamental component of all interpersonal relationships, even though they tend to be underacknowledged outside of the clinical literatures (Duck, 1994). There is no reason to expect that formal youth mentoring relationships

would be exceptions. In fact, Rhodes and colleagues (2005), in their efforts to develop a measure of youth mentoring relationship quality, found that negative experiences were more likely to differentiate relationships of varying quality than were positive ones.

Researchers studying workplace and academic mentoring have developed typologies of negative relationships. Although these types of adult mentoring relationships differ in many ways from those between youth and adults, this body of literature highlights what could be learned through widening our lens to include a close examination of negative experiences in youth mentoring relationships. A dysfunctional academic mentoring relationship (i.e., a relationship between a faculty mentor and graduate student protégé) has been defined as one that is “no longer functioning effectively for one or both partners” and where “(a) the primary needs of one or both partners are not being met, (b) the long-term costs for one or both partners outweigh the long-term benefits, or (c) one or both partners are suffering distress as a result of being in the mentorship” (Johnson & Huwe, 2002, p. 45). Twelve problems or sources of disturbance are thought to explain the majority of dysfunctional academic mentoring relationships. These include poor matching, mentor incompetence, mentor neglect and abandonment, relational conflict, boundary violations, cross-gender and cross-race matching (where factors such as stereotypes and differing socialization practices may interfere) and protégé traits and behaviors (Johnson & Huwe, 2002, pp. 46–50). Building on Duck’s (1994) typology of the “dark side” of close personal relationships, Scandura (1998) proposed seven potential dysfunctions in workplace mentoring relationships: (a) bullying or exploitation, (b) sabotage and revenge, (c) relational conflicts where there is no malintent, (d) the “spoiling” of a positive relationship through betrayal or disappointment, (e) submissiveness and overdependence on the mentor, (f) deception, and (g) harassment.

Research on diverse workplace mentoring relationships suggests that dissimilarities in backgrounds and attitudes, values, and beliefs may increase the likelihood of negative experiences (Ragins, 1997). Cultural differences may contribute to feelings of dissimilarity between mentors and protégés in formal youth mentoring relationships as well. Research has demonstrated that youth who report having natural mentors (nonparental adults in their communities who have a significant influence on them and on whom they can rely for support and guidance) indicate that these adults are similar to them in terms of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds (Cavell, Meehan, Heffer, & Holladay, 2002; Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Rhodes, 2002; Sanchez & Reyes, 1999). In contrast, formal mentoring programs more typically match youth of color with White mentors (Grossman & Tierney,

1998), as the majority of adults who volunteer through formal mentoring programs are White (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006) and many youth of color would remain on waiting lists for long periods of time if matches were made based solely on the basis of race (Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, 2002). Examinations of whether there are differences in the benefits to youth of same versus cross-race matches in formal programs have yielded mixed results. One study found no differences (DuBois et al., 2002) and another reported some differences but these were not of a robust or consistent nature (Rhodes et al., 2002). A third study found no difference in the level of benefits youth derived when youth and adults were matched on the basis of shared interests and the relationship endured at least 11 months, however cross-race relationships were more likely to end prematurely (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

The research on academic and workplace mentoring relationship difficulties can certainly inform the study of youth mentoring. However, there are some important differences between these types of relationships. The youth served by community-based mentoring programs are by definition vulnerable in some way, whether by virtue of living in a low-income, single-parent, or immigrant household; having a parent who is incarcerated; being in the foster care system; or struggling with emotional, behavioral, or academic difficulties. Given that community-based youth mentoring relationships are intended to mimic naturally occurring supportive relationships between youth and adults, they are more akin to friendships and tend to be more personal than academic or workplace mentoring relationships, with participants sometimes joining in family gatherings or attending school-related events. The more personal nature of these relationships is believed to heighten their potential for positive influence on the youth's socio-emotional, cognitive, and identity development (Rhodes, 2002). At the same time, this also contributes to greater ambiguity around boundary issues than is present in mentoring relationships between adults, heightening the potential for power differentials to be mishandled (Spencer, Liang, Rhodes, West, & Singer, 2006). Rhodes (2002) noted that many adolescents enter mentoring programs with a history of inconsistent relationships with adults and the more personal nature of youth mentoring relationships "can touch on vulnerabilities in youth in ways that other, less personal youth programs do not" (p. 58). Programs also foster the notion that these relationships have the potential to last for many years, as some indeed do, and tend to emphasize the significant and lasting impact such relationships can have on a young person's life (e.g., Barrett, Annis, & Riffey, 2004).

The goal of the present study was to begin to build an understanding of failures in youth mentoring relationships through an open-ended qualitative study of these occurrences. This paper presents findings from an interview study with youth and adults who were in mentoring relationships established through two formal, community-based, one-to-one youth mentoring programs that did not last through the initial time commitment made at the beginning of the match. Due to the paucity of research focusing on early terminations in youth mentoring relationships, the focus was on exploring and describing the participants' experiences of these relationships rather than testing a predetermined set of hypotheses about them. Thus a qualitative approach was taken in which participants' understandings of their experiences in this specific type of youth mentoring program were examined through the analysis of in-depth individual interviews.

Method

Description of Participating Mentoring Programs

Participants were recruited from two Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) community-based mentoring programs in an urban community in the northeast. Both programs adhere to the best practices for youth mentoring programs established by MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership (2003). Mentors and youth were asked to make an initial 1-year commitment, although the agencies hoped the relationships would last much longer as they strive to foster close and enduring mentoring relationships that they liken to friendships. Prematch training was provided to the mentors but not the youth. Potential matches were presented to the mentors and the youth's parent or guardian. Mentors and youth met for the first time at the youth's home in the presence of an agency staff person and the youth's parent or guardian, at which time the participants were asked commit to the match. The extent of the researcher's prior involvement with the agencies was a previous study initiated by the researcher of a small group of close and enduring relationships established through these programs (Spencer, 2006).

Participants

A total of 31 male and female participants (20 adults and 11 adolescents) were interviewed for this study (see Table 1 for details on the participants). The adult mentors were 19–47 years of age. Fourteen of the adult participants

identified themselves as White, 2 as African American, 1 as Latino, 1 as Asian, and 2 as bi- or multiracial. The youth were 10–13 years of age, and were a racially and ethnically diverse group of 6 African American, 3 White, 2 Latino, and 1 biracial youth. The mentoring relationships had lasted between 1 and 11 months. The demographics of these participants were similar to those of the youth and adults served by these agencies during the time of the study. The youth served by the agencies ranged in age from 7 to 16 years. Approximately 31% were African American, 32% White, 20% Latino, 10% multiracial, and 4% Asian. Another 3% did not identify with one of these major census categories. The volunteers were 18 years or older, with most (53%) between 25 and 35 years of age. The majority were White (76%). Ten percent were African American, 5% Asian, 3% Latino, 3% multiracial, and 3% did not identify with one of these categories.

Procedure

An unsuccessful match was defined simply as one that did not last through the initial 1-year time commitment required by the participating agencies. This definition was also informed by previous research indicating that the positive benefits of mentoring are more likely to be realized when a relationship endures at least 1 year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Over an 18-month period, the agencies sent a letter from the researcher to the members of all early terminating relationships. Approximately 150 mentors and youth were invited to take part in the study. Interested participants sent their contact information directly to the researcher using return envelopes provided to them. Thirty-seven people responded to the letter and 31 ultimately agreed to schedule an interview and followed through. The original intention was that some matched pairs of mentors and youth would be interviewed. However, in only one case did both the adult and youth indicate interest in participating.

In most cases, the parents of the youth requested to be present during the interview and in some cases a parent participated in the interview with her or his child. Parental consent for the youth participants was obtained either prior to or at the time of the interview, and youth assent and mentor consent was obtained at the time of the interview. A gift certificate to a book or music store was given to the participants upon completion of the interview. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

The in-depth (Johnson, 2002) semistructured (Seidman, 1991) interviews were conducted by the author, a middle-class European American

Table 1
Age and Racial or Ethnic Background^a of the Study Participants,
Racial or Ethnic Background of the Participants' Mentors
or Protégés,^b and Length of the Mentoring Relationship

Name ^c	Age	Race or Ethnicity	Race or Ethnicity of Protégé or Mentor	Relationship Length (in Months)
<i>Mentors</i>				
Adrianna	33	White	White	3
Chris	28	White	White	3
Cindy	31	Multiracial	Biracial	2
Courtney	25	White	Portuguese	10
D-Fire	47	Black	Black	< 1
Edward	42	African American	African American	7
George	27	Columbian	Latino	2
Howell	55	White	White	3
John	25	White	White	3
John Smith	36	White	Latino	< 1
John Stevens	25	White	Latino	9
Joe	24	South Asian	Multiracial	4
Joy	45	White	White	2
Meredith	25	White	Black	3
Michael	28	White	Latino	4
Sarah	24	Biracial	Black	4
Simone	44	White	Black	4
Stewart	19	White	African American	< 1
Susan	53	White	White	2
Violet	26	White	White	5
<i>Protégés</i>				
April	12	Biracial	White	< 1
Desiree	13	White	Italian American	4
Emma	10	African American	Caribbean American	11
Eugene	12	African American	Biracial	3
Joe	12	Puerto Rican	White	1
Max	13	African American	White	< 1
Shawn	12	Black	White	2
Steven	15	Black	Haitian	2
Walt Fraser	12	White	White	3
W.C.	12	White	Latino	3
Yelitzza	11	African American	African American	1

a. Identification as provided by the participants.

b. Race or ethnicity of mentor/protégé as reported by the study participant.

c. Pseudonyms provided by the participants.

woman, in a location of the participants' choosing, such as their home or a university office. At the beginning of each interview, the purposes of the study were explained and the interview format described. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question and end their participation at any time. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour.

Semistructured interview protocols were developed but were used primarily as a guide, allowing the interviewer to follow the participants' narratives (Seidman, 1991).¹ Thus while some questions were asked of all participants, many of the interview questions evolved out of the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee and were focused on understanding the nature and course of each individual relationship. Interview questions covered topics such as motivations for participating in a mentoring program, expectations going into the relationship, typical activities, how the relationship progressed, and how and why the relationship ended. These open-ended questions were followed by questions intended to facilitate further exploration of the specific experiences identified by the interviewee. For example, a statement about feeling disappointed by the mentoring relationship was followed by a request to tell a story about a specific time when the person felt disappointed and further questions about what this experience had been like and how he or she thought about it presently.

Analysis

The transcriptions of the audio recordings of all 31 interviews were verified in preparation for analysis, a procedure that involved listening to each recording in full and making any necessary corrections to the transcription. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the absence of research on this topic, and the open-ended interview format, an inductive approach to data analysis was taken. Although not a grounded theory study, initial coding followed the principles of open coding outlined in a constructivist approach to the use of grounded theory data analytic techniques (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews were divided among four coders (female graduate students, two Latina and two European American). Each interview was read through one at a time and coded line by line, which allowed for a close examination of the entirety of the interview transcripts and helped maintain openness to the exploration of emergent themes from within each interview (Charmaz, 2006). Then the coder constructed a narrative summary (Way, 1998) of the transcript, in which salient themes were identified and detailed. These summaries also included descriptions of the reasons for the relationship failures, based on explicit statements made by the interviewees and

interpretive understandings constructed through this analytic process. From these summaries and through discussions between research team members, two major categories were identified within both the mentors' and the protégés' narratives for further analysis: (a) expectations for and (b) challenges faced within the mentoring relationships. The interviews were divided between two coders, with one coder analyzing the mentors' and the other the protégés' narratives, and were coded again for themes within each of these categories. These themes were then entered into conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to facilitate comparisons across the participants. In an effort to mitigate researcher bias and to further enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, a preliminary report was generated and distributed to the agencies. Feedback from staff members who worked closely with the mentoring matches was solicited and used to further develop the findings presented here. Given the small sample size and exploratory nature of this study, the themes presented below were selected for their salience and relevance to practice, rather than just their frequency. Whereas some themes appeared in many of the mentor or protégé interviews, others appeared in only two or three. Low frequency themes that also held force for the agencies, or were recognized as being familiar problems, were retained.

Findings

The analyses of the interview data yielded descriptive information about why some mentoring relationships terminate early and the participants' understandings of the impact these early terminations had on them. Six themes are detailed in the sections below: (a) mentor or protégé abandonment, (b) perceived lack of protégé motivation, (c) unfulfilled expectations, (d) deficiencies in mentor relational skills, including the inability to bridge cultural divides, (e) family interference, and (f) inadequate agency support. These were not mutually exclusive in that two or more of these themes may have played some role in the demise of any one relationship.

Mentor or Protégé Abandonment

For some, the relationship ended early because their partner simply disappeared. Six of the youth (5 males and 1 female) interviewed had been abandoned by their mentors. A few even described having the most unfortunate experience of excitedly awaiting a mentor who simply never arrived

for a scheduled outing. These youth never heard from their mentors again, despite repeated efforts on the part of their families and the mentoring programs to contact them. They described feelings of disappointment and diminished enthusiasm for the program. One youth, after having two mentors disappear, decided not to be matched with another mentor, despite his initial keen interest in the program and his continued desire for a stable and consistent adult male presence in his life. As he (Eugene) said, "I was like really devastated. . . . After two incidents, I'm afraid that that might happen again. So, I just gave up on the whole thing."

Six of the mentors (5 males and 1 female) reported being abandoned by their protégés. Surprisingly, the perceived impact on the adults was somewhat similar to that of the youth whose mentors had terminated their relationships, although more muted than that expressed by Eugene above. These adults expressed disappointment and feelings of ambivalence about trying again. One mentor, Joy, said, "maybe I'll do it again some day . . . it's just like [not] right now, I learned something. . . . it was painful, a painful experience."

Perceived Lack of Protégé Motivation

A few of the mentors suspected their protégés were not all that interested in having a mentor. One mentor, Courtney, noted that her protégé had a strong support system of family and friends. Her protégé was also a basketball player who, once the season started, had little interest in the match. Courtney concluded that her protégé enrolled in the program without realizing the commitment it involved because friends of hers had done so. Another mentor, John Smith, was told after his match did not work out that his protégé's mother had wanted him to participate in the program and his protégé had just gone along with the idea.

Unfulfilled Expectations

Mentors. When asked about their reasons for becoming a mentor, most of the adults described looking forward to developing a close, personal relationship with a young person. Whether this was out of a desire to "give something back," "make a difference," or provide a young person with "new experiences," the mentors envisioned themselves developing strong and lasting connections with their protégés. This lovely, almost romanticized, characterization of a mentoring relationship was soon met with the reality of forging such a bond with an unrelated and, in most cases, a highly

vulnerable young person. Starting as strangers with nothing to connect them but a stated desire to participate in a mentoring program, the challenging work of relationship building became strikingly evident to many of these adults. Discrepancies between the unspoken and at times previously unconscious expectations held by the mentors and the realities of their actual experiences became apparent. The following varieties of expectations appeared to play a role in the early end to some of these mentoring relationships: (a) expectations about the needs of the protégé—that they would need both more and less from a mentor than they actually seemed to, (b) expectations about some of their own needs being met, such as feeling “good” about the time spent with the young person, and (c) expectations for the relationship based on previous experiences as a mentor.

Mentors recalled being asked by the agencies whether they had specific preferences about their match and most said they did not. The response of one mentor, Susan, was typical: “I really didn’t have a preference . . . and I was open to any match.” Another mentor, Michael, said, “I didn’t tell them [the agency] I was looking for anything in particular. . . . I’d be up for anything.” However, after being matched with a young person who had a challenging home life, Michael realized he did indeed have some preferences and expectations for the relationship. A teacher and youth worker, Michael realized that he expected his mentoring relationship to be uncomplicated by troubles in the young person’s family. He did not want to have to “worry” whether “everything [was] going all right at home,” noting that he was “already kind of dealing with that to some degree [at work]” and it was not something he wanted to deal with outside of his job. In retrospect, he realized he “probably went into it [the match] with an idea of, you know, ‘Oh, this will be great. This will be different, it’ll be fun.’”

Some mentors entered these relationships with preconceived ideas about what a young person who was seeking a mentor might need. However, these expectations seemed only to have become apparent to the mentors after having spent some time with their protégés. For one mentor, John, the child did not seem to need a mentor in the way he had imagined:

. . . it didn’t seem to me that he needed much help. . . . I kind of had this ideal of what the kid was going to be like. . . . It was a little disappointing that he was not like that. . . . I was kinda hopin’ for, you know, the poor kid . . . with no dad, just him and his mom . . . strugglin’ to get by.

The protégé fit John’s expectations of having a low family income, but the child had many strong relationships with family members and several good

friends. John's sense that all he was providing was access to activities the youth might not otherwise have left him feeling less than satisfied with the contribution he believed he was making to the child's life.

More typical among these mentors, however, was having the experience of being taken aback by the great needs of the youth. Nine of the mentors interviewed described feeling overwhelmed by the difficult circumstances the youth and their families faced. As one mentor, Joy, said about picking her protégé up for their outings, "it was hard to go over there, . . . because I felt somewhat dismayed at their living situation." Joy was also unable to reach her protégé for a period of time because the family's telephone had been disconnected. She thought about going over to the protégé's house, but was reluctant to do so. Joy attributed this reluctance to uncertainty about what her protégé would want her to do but also implied feelings of discomfort played a role, as she said "[I] didn't know what I was gonna find. I was afraid." Joy knew the family had been involved with the Department of Social Services but did not know why, which might have contributed to her uneasiness. She left two notes but never heard back from her protégé. Reflecting on her experience, Joy said, "I just I realized how very difficult it is to have any kind of intimate relationship. One-on-one relationships are hard and then with someone that is vulnerable like that. . . . It's such a big responsibility."

Other adults also found themselves feeling in over their heads early on in the relationship. In one case, the mentor (Joe) was unable to manage his own personal response to the life difficulties his protégé was facing and the child's desire to spend as much time with him as possible. Joe ended the relationship in hopes that another adult who felt better able to meet his needs would become the child's mentor. As Joe said:

He was the kind of kid who needed that attention, who needed someone to meet with him. . . . He wanted to meet up, I mean, almost every day of the week, and I understand that. He's a young kid, he wants to do something, and I can understand that. But, that's just not me. And, I'm sure he's found another Big Brother who takes much more interest, and who has more time to do these things. . . . I hope he has.

At the beginning of the interview, Joe stated that he had ended this relationship due to increasing work demands and the sense that he just no longer had time for the program. However, the narrative above suggests that he was overwhelmed by his protégé's requests and was not sure how to set workable limits around their meeting times. Like Joe, several other mentors relayed that they had come to the conclusion that they were not the best

match for the young person, as the protégé seemed to need more than they felt equipped to give. However, also like Joe, at the beginning of the interview most of these mentors attributed their ending of their relationships to external issues, such as time constraints. It was only as their narratives unfolded over the course of the interviews that these deeper struggles became more apparent.

Another type of expectation some mentors carried with them into the relationship was that they would feel “good” or have some other kind of positive feeling as a result of the relationship. In many cases this did not occur, or at least not as quickly as anticipated. As one mentor, Meredith, stated, “Obviously, when you volunteer, you’re not expecting . . . the world back. . . . But you want something . . . you at least want to leave with a feeling . . . a good feeling.” Rather than the good feelings she had anticipated, Meredith was left with the sense that the payoff was too small for what she felt she had to invest.

Two of the female mentors expressed explicit hopes that they would build close, personal, and lasting connections with their protégés and were disappointed when these did not materialize. Susan had thought about becoming a mentor for many years and was excited when the time came that she was able to follow through with this intention:

It was a huge accomplishment for me for eight years of wanting to do this to finally accomplish this goal. And get everything under way and be matched with someone who I was very excited about and thought we could have a lot of fun and . . . after I met her I went home, and I was thinking, “Oh, this is great. This will be long term.” . . . I was sort of fantasizing about going to her graduation and being there for her wedding . . . just thinking in terms of a very long-term relationship.

Susan’s protégé, on the other hand, did not show as much interest in building a close relationship and eventually ended the match.

Two mentors had previous positive experiences with protégés that contrasted greatly with how things went for them in their second match. One of these mentors, George, was seriously injured in an accident sustained during his work as a police officer after only two meetings with his second protégé, Carl. Although he said he needed to end this relationship with Carl because of time constraints associated with the recovery from this accident, George seemed relieved to have a reason to end the relationship. Unlike his first protégé, Carl showed little outward interest in George’s profession or other aspects of his day-to-day life and George struggled to connect with him in their limited time together. George also described Carl as being anxious to

make plans with George as frequently as possible—a little too frequently for George's tastes. He framed his decision to end the relationship as an opportunity for Carl to be matched with a mentor who could give him more of what he needed, stating, "Because I've met . . . a few other matches, and I've seen their Big Brothers that were there like 10 times more than I could ever be."

Protégés. In other cases, it was the protégé's expectations for the relationship that were not met. Two of the youth interviewed decided to end their matches because they did not feel they were a good fit and another was contemplating ending the match with his second mentor for this same reason. One girl's (Desiree) first impression of her mentor was that the two did not share the same interests. She decided to go ahead and give the match a try but ultimately ended it. Despite having known her mentor for 4 months, she still did not feel that she could really talk to her mentor, especially about problems she was having in school. Desiree had hoped for a closer, more personal relationship than she had been able to achieve with her mentor.

One boy's (Walt Fraser) first mentor was abruptly relocated to another city for work and he had just been matched with a new mentor at the time of the interview. He, like the girl just described, expressed concern about his ability to connect with his new mentor. With his first mentor, Walt had experienced more of an exchange of ideas and had the sense that he was his mentor's top priority when the two spent time together. His brief encounters with his new mentor left him with feelings of doubt about the fit between the mentor's interests and his current needs. Consequently, he was contemplating whether he wanted to continue with the match. Like some of the mentors, these protégés seemed to come to a greater awareness of the expectations they had held entering the program when their relationships did not go as well as they had hoped.

Deficiencies in Mentor Relational Skills

The absence of three specific sets of relational skills on the part of mentors seemed to play a role in the demise of a few of these mentoring relationships. These were as follows: (a) lack of youth focus, (b) unrealistic, or developmentally inappropriate, expectations of the youth, and (c) low awareness of personal biases and how cultural differences shape relationships.

Lack of youth focus. Some mentors seemed to have difficulty engaging with the youth on their terms. One protégé, Emma, described how she never quite hit it off with her mentor and partly attributed this to her mentor's

inability to be a kid with her. Emma's mother, who was present during the interview, put it this way: "she [the mentor] didn't get on her level." Emma then chimed in, "My mother will make snow angels. She would do things with you. She will act your age. But [my mentor] was just her age, not my age." For Emma, engaging in activities that are fun and interesting to young people is an important skill a mentor needs.

Unrealistic expectations. In other cases, it seemed that mentors had unrealistic expectations of their protégés given their developmental status. For example, a few mentors complained about their protégés not initiating contact with them; rather they had to be the one to place the call. However, youth are often accustomed to having adults set the frame of a relationship and may feel uncomfortable initiating contacts. One protégé, Steven, described what it felt like to him when his mentor told him that he could call: "He says that I can call him at any time. . . . I'm like . . . a shy boy, so I don't wanna, you know, call him. . . 'cause, you know, he's in college, and I don't want to call him durin' his college." Here Steven described his reluctance to interrupt his mentor in what Steven perceived to be important activities and later added he was concerned about making his mentor "mad." Many youth would likely share Steven's concerns or have other reasons why they might feel awkward or uncomfortable calling their mentors.

Some mentors expressed disappointment that they did not feel their efforts were sufficiently appreciated by their protégés. As one mentor, Cindy, stated:

My expectation was, "Gosh, . . . I know a lot of young people who'd really appreciate me just calling them up [chuckling]! . . . If I'm gonna do that for . . . a young person I'm not related to, then it needs to be . . . appreciated."

However, young people are often not thinking about what an adult needs in a relationship and may not express appreciation, even when deeply felt. Although these sentiments are certainly understandable, these mentors may have been expecting behaviors that were out of synch with the developmental proclivities of their protégés.

Inability to bridge cultural differences. Another relational skill that seemed lacking in some of these mentors was an awareness of the role that cultural differences play in interpersonal relationships and how personal values shape the ways we experience and respond to those whose backgrounds are different from our own. The narratives of several of the mentors conveyed

potential misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences and some contained unexamined biases and prejudicial stereotypes.

For one mentor, Meredith, such biases were at the heart of the challenges she experienced in her relationship with her protégé. Meredith struggled with the differences in values and economic differences between herself and her protégé's family. She said she was "surprised" by her protégé's family and also by her own responses to them. She stated that it was "frustrating" for her to deal with what she described as "like a poor, um . . . kind of ignorant family" who had a "'hood' mentality, rather than just kind of poor." She also struggled with the size of her protégé's family, stating "I definitely wouldn't, um, have a Little Sister that has eight siblings again. . . . And no dad. . . . it's too much like, they don't get nearly enough attention. Because you can be poor and . . . have only two children." Meredith described her feelings of personal discomfort with the economic disparities between her and her protégé in the following way:

I felt like I was almost making her feel worse in a way . . . 'Cause I live much differently from her . . . When we go over to my . . . apartment, with my balcony view, and my flat screen TV, and like I almost feel worse, like I'm making her . . . "look what I have." . . . Oh, I'm the rich White girl and you're the poor Black girl.

These socioeconomic differences may have also contributed to tension between Meredith and her protégé's mother. Early in the relationship, Meredith wanted to take her protégé out for pizza, so had said to the mother, "Maybe she [the protégé] can bring along eight, ten dollars?" However, when Meredith went to pick up her protégé, "her mother kind of shoos her out the door, we get there, no money." Meredith interpreted the mother's behavior as irresponsible. However, it is possible that this incident was indicative of differences in expectations for the mentoring relationship and uncertainty about how to approach these. To Meredith, \$8 to \$10 may be a reasonable sum of money to spend on a meal. To her protégé's family, this sum may have exceeded their capabilities.

Another mentor, John Stevens, suspected that racial and ethnic differences played a role in his relationship with his protégé throughout their match and also in how it ended, but had difficulty identifying the specific ways these differences may have influenced their relationship. Among his stated reasons for becoming a mentor was to learn more about "different family backgrounds . . . and . . . the neighborhoods and . . . different growing up." John sensed that his protégé "took great pride in his . . . own . . . ethnic background," which John described as Latino, and that given this pride John did not feel he could serve as a role model for this youth because

he was White. John struggled with the differences in their backgrounds, saying “I know a little Spanish, but it’s not, you know . . . I, I didn’t grow up in . . . that environment. And so, I couldn’t, you know [chuckles] . . . I felt very awkward, trying to relate to him.” His protégé was direct with him about some of his experiences with racism, as John said that he had on occasion made suggestions about places to go and his protégé had responded by saying, “Oh, they don’t, you know, like people like me there.” John knew that there was truth in his protégé’s words as he said, “which, you know, you can kind of see. I mean, it’s the real world and, you know, . . . he hung out, you know, sometimes with the wrong crowd and just, you know, the way they dress—I mean, people, you know, do make those kind of. . . which, you know, is wrong.” Still, he found it difficult to talk about these issues with his protégé and never asked him what he thought about having a White mentor. Unlike Meredith discussed above, John had some limited awareness that cultural differences played a significant role in his mentoring relationship, but his awareness was limited and he ultimately did not feel well equipped to work with these differences in this relationship.

Family Interference

In two cases, family interference posed a significant challenge to the mentoring relationship. One mentor, Stewart, suspected that his protégé’s stepfather put a halt to their mentoring relationship. Stewart met with his protégé only one time but noted that whereas the protégé’s mother was excited about the match the stepfather arrived late to the meeting and did not really participate. Stewart noted what felt to him like tension between the stepfather and his protégé. When his phone calls to the family after that initial meeting were never returned, Stewart suspected the stepfather had something to do with this disconnection. In another case, it was suspected that the protégé’s mother had interfered with the child’s relationship with her mentor by not passing along telephone messages from the mentor to the protégé. After meeting for several months, the relationship began to break down as the mentor and protégé experienced some difficulties contacting each other. The protégé eventually decided to end the relationship as she was feeling less and less connected with her mentor.

Inadequate Agency Support

In two cases, agency involvement—too much and too little—was cited as a challenge in the mentoring relationship. One mentor, Simone, sought out the assistance of program staff in mediating a conflict with her protégé. On

one of their outings her protégé had tested the limits Simone had set, placing herself in what Simone perceived to be a physically unsafe situation. Simone wanted to continue with the relationship but felt she needed help conveying to her protégé the importance of abiding by the limits set during their outings, particularly with regard to physical safety. Simone decided she wanted to discuss these issues together with her protégé, the protégé's mother, and the mentoring program staff. Difficulties scheduling this meeting were never surmounted and the match ultimately dissolved.

Another mentor, Cindy, said that the program staff was too involved in her relationship with her protégé, creating indirect communication patterns. Cindy claimed that throughout the match, the social worker was an active go-between in the relationship with her protégé and the lack of direct communication became a major problem for Cindy. For example, Cindy stated that she had suggested to her protégé that they go to an outdoor festival at a local park. Her protégé agreed but then Cindy heard back from the social worker that the protégé thought it was a really immature suggestion to go to the zoo, which shared the same name as the park where the festival was being held. Cindy said this incident left her feeling unsupported in the match as she did not think that either the social worker or her protégé's guardian had ever suggested to the protégé that she communicate directly with Cindy.

Discussion

Not all premature relationship endings are avoidable, as some mentors and youth will experience unanticipated changes in their life circumstances that preclude the continuation of their mentoring relationships. However, this study details some of the negative experiences encountered by a group of mentors and youth and points to roles programs may be able to play in potentially preventing some relationship failures. The findings highlight the complexity of mentoring relationships and the high level of commitment needed from all involved to work through the challenges that can arise as a well-intentioned adult and vulnerable young person, often with quite different backgrounds, work to forge a meaningful and lasting connection.

In particular, the findings from this study suggest that mentors and youth approach the mentoring relationship with expectations that, if not met or acknowledged and appropriately addressed, can interfere with the mentoring process. Mentors and youth may be unaware that they hold such expectations or in some cases reluctant to state their preferences for a variety of reasons. For example, some youth and their families may be concerned that stating preferences about racial or ethnic matching will extend the time spent on

waiting lists given that there are fewer mentors of color. Mentors who do not have much experience spending time one-on-one with youth may have idealized notions about what it will be like to build a connection with an adolescent. Mentoring programs may be able to offer greater assistance to prospective mentors and protégés in articulating their preferences for and expectations of the mentoring relationship. For example, descriptions of a variety of prototypical matches could be developed and presented to prospective program participants to elicit some of these preferences and expectations.

Some of these expectations may be set up by programs themselves. The public service campaigns encouraging adults to volunteer as mentors tend to present mentoring as almost exclusively fun and easy. Mentoring is also often depicted as a profound and life-changing experience for the young person. Such messages can serve to foster enthusiasm for this form of volunteerism. However, this study suggests that programs also bear a responsibility for preparing mentors and youth for the realities of some of the more challenging and mundane aspects of these relationships.

There has been little consideration of the role that expectations play in the mentoring process. One study of mentoring relationships established through BBBSA found that matches without reported problems displayed greater agreement between mentors, youth, and parents about expectations for the potential benefits to the youth (Meissen & Lounsbury, 1981). Another (Madia & Lutz, 2004) found that discrepancies between mentors' expectations for the roles they would serve in their protégés' lives and the nature of their actual relationship were associated with both relationship quality and duration. Theoretical frameworks such as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), namely outcome expectations or the anticipated results of performing certain behaviors, could be drawn on in future research to better understand how the expectations mentors and youth bring with them may shape the course of the mentoring relationship.

The literature on early terminations in psychotherapy could also be instructive. Research has indicated that when patients seeking psychotherapy services are provided with pretreatment preparation such as interviews, videos, or brochures that detail the parameters of this intervention, they tend to stay the full course of treatment, miss fewer sessions, and report greater satisfaction with the treatment process (Reis & Brown, 1999). There may be some parallels here for youth mentoring. Future research could examine whether spending more time up front informing potential mentors and protégés about the nature of mentoring relationships, typical challenges that may arise, and how these can be handled could help mentors and youth begin to identify their expectations for the match and potentially reduce the rate of relationship failures.

Examinations of whether such steps can help to alleviate the especially troubling phenomenon of mentor abandonment could prove fruitful. Scandura (1998), in her research on workplace mentoring, has urged formal programs to “allow both mentors and protégés input into the matching process and some mechanism for exit if the assigned mentoring relationship does not work out” (p. 451). It may be important for programs to stress the importance of ending the relationship appropriately from the beginning of the relationship. Mentors and protégés may need to know up front what their options are for ending a relationship so that they do not just take off when they are unsure of how to handle a difficult situation.

The findings from this study suggest that in some cases mentors may state that they are ending their relationship due to an unanticipated life event or the sense that they are “too busy” when they are experiencing some type of difficulty in the match. The narratives of some participants in this study indicate that mentors may not readily identify the difficulties or disappointments they are experiencing and life events can become easy excuses for ending an already troubled relationship. Research examining reasons for mentoring relationship failures may need to get underneath these ready-made reasons to tap into other potentially more meaningful causes of relationship failures. The findings also point to the importance of mentoring programs providing ongoing and sensitive support to their matches. Through regular contact with matches on a periodic basis, program staff may be able to identify when trouble is brewing and step in to provide assistance or to facilitate termination in the event of an inappropriate match. Given the differences in socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds of many mentors and protégés, special attention may need to be paid to the potential for a mentor to feel overwhelmed by the significant challenges many of these youth face and assist mentors in clarifying their roles and responsibilities. In some cases, this may involve adeptly dealing with multifaceted family dynamics that may be impacting the mentoring relationship as well.

This study also points to the possibility that training directed toward helping mentors to identify some of their culture- and class-based values and beliefs and develop skills for effectively engaging in cross-cultural relationships with youth could be critical to the success of some mentoring relationships. Most adults who participate in formal mentoring programs are White and reside in middle- to upper-income households (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006), whereas the youth targeted by these programs tend to be of color and reside in low-income households (Freedman, 1993). Left unchecked, the practice of pairing White middle-class adults with low-income youth, many of whom are of color, sets up a situation in which White

middle-class values are being promoted in communities that do not share this background. Here again, the counseling and psychotherapy literatures, which have been actively grappling with the role that cultural differences play in helping relationships, could prove instructive. Training models have been developed to foster the development of helping professionals' cultural competence, which includes cultural knowledge, skills, and personal awareness (Sue & Sue, 2003). Research indicates that such training is associated with greater satisfaction with the treatment process among clients of color (Constantine, 2002). These models could be modified to be more directly applicable to mentoring relationships and incorporated into mentor prematch and ongoing training. This study suggests that social class and developmental issues may need to be addressed in this way as well.

Whereas the above discussion focuses on working to mitigate the potentially negative effects of cultural differences in mentoring relationships, another important approach would be to improve efforts to reach volunteer mentors with backgrounds more similar to the youth being served. Liang and Grossman (in press) point out that when given the opportunity to choose, youth tend to select mentors who share similar background characteristics. As Flaxman, Ascher, and Harrington (1988) noted decades ago, social distance between mentors and protégés may render the support and advice proffered by some well-intentioned mentors meaningless given the realities of the protégés' day-to-day lives. Further, norms and expectations for interactions with nonkin adults are heavily influenced by culture (Liang & Grossman, in press), and mentors who do not share the cultural backgrounds of their protégés may miss or misinterpret important cues and preferences expressed by the young person.

It is important to note the limitations of this study, given its nature and scope. The small and unique sample, while allowing for in-depth analysis, limits the generalizability of these findings beyond the few relationships studied here. The participants were selected from only two mentoring programs, both of which were community based. Many mentoring programs have different foci, goals, and program practices and procedures from those of the BBBSA. Future research garnering the perspectives of paired mentors and youth and contextualizing these within a systematic examination of the program policies and practices would provide greater insight into the different individual, dyadic, and program-level processes that contribute to mentoring relationships going awry. Further, these interviews offer only a one-time retrospective account of these individuals' experiences in and understandings of these relationships and no comparisons can be made between these early-terminating and more long-standing relationships. Longitudinal studies that track the development of mentoring relationships

from the time of match through termination of the relationship are greatly needed. Such studies would help to identify the nature and course of the relational processes present in more and less enduring and successful mentoring relationships. Finally, mentors are overrepresented among these participants. The reason for lower participation rates among the youth is unknown; however one possible factor may be that the parents of these youth may be reluctant to involve their children further in an experience that was in some way negative for their child. Particular attention should be paid to issues of youth recruitment in future studies.

This study makes clear the importance of continued examination of mentoring relationship failures. The present efforts to describe and evaluate the benefits of mentoring should be accompanied by systematic descriptive research documenting the prevalence, nature, causes, and consequences of relationship failures. Even close examinations of negative experiences within relatively successful relationships would help deepen our understanding of the mentoring process more generally. Greater attention to the range of participants' experiences in mentoring relationships would offer better guidance for ways to improve youth mentoring program practices.

It can be quite challenging to build a close and enduring relationship with a highly vulnerable young person, particularly perhaps for adults who have enjoyed relatively less troubled lives. When emotional and/or behavioral problems and complex family dynamics are added to this mix, the potential pitfalls in the relationship formation process may multiply. The at-times unbridled enthusiasm for mentoring needs to be tempered with more sober considerations of the challenges faced by mentors and youth participating in the growing number of mentoring programs. Understanding mentoring relationships that do not go well is a critical component of a sound empirical knowledge base that can serve to guide mentoring programs as they strive to foster connections that do indeed make a positive difference in the lives of youth.

Note

1. Copies of the interview protocols are available from the author upon request.

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