J Primary Prevent (2009) 30:109–130
DOI 10.1007/s10935-009-0172-1

ORIGINAL PAPER

"She Gives Me a Break from the World": Formal Youth Mentoring Relationships Between Adolescent Girls and Adult Women

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Published online: 13 March 2009

Abstract Formal mentoring programs have historically tended to match youth with same-sex mentors; more recently, mentoring programs designed specifically for girls have begun cropping up in response to theories on gender and adolescent girls' psychological health and development, which suggest girls have particular psychosocial needs and ways of relating. Yet, there have been few empirical studies that explicitly examine the relational processes in adolescent girls' relationships with female mentors from the perspectives of the participants themselves. In the present study, qualitative interviews conducted with 12 female youth–adult pairs of participants ($N = 24$) in a one-to-one community-based mentoring program were analyzed thematically using a holistic-content approach. Examining these participants' narratives about their experiences in the program, three interrelated relational processes were identified: (a) engaged and authentic emotional support; (b) the development of new skills and confidence through collaborations; and, (c) experiences of companionship that provided relief from daily stresses. *Editors' Strategic Implications:* The focus on female dyads and relationships will richly inform further studies of the process of mentoring and provide insights for practitioners of a variety of gender-specific prevention programs.

Keywords Youth mentoring · Adolescent girls · Gender · Emotional support · Instrumental support

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Introduction

Formal youth mentoring programs have historically tended to match youth with same-sex mentors (DuBois et al. 2002a; Herrera et al. 2000). More recently, mentoring programs designed specifically for girls have begun cropping up, partly in response to theories on gender and adolescent girls' psychological health and development. These theories typically suggest girls have particular psychosocial needs and ways of relating (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Johnson et al. 1999; Taylor et al. 1995; Way 1995). Yet, there have been few empirical studies that explicitly examine the relational processes in adolescent girls' relationships with female mentors from the perspectives of the participants themselves. Although some research has examined college-aged women's relationships with academic mentors (Liang et al. 2006; Liang et al. 2002), focused empirical examinations of female youth mentoring relationships are relatively rare (see Bay-Cheng et al. 2006; Sullivan 1996, for exceptions).

Interest in issues related to gender in youth mentoring is growing, with a handful of new studies on female relationships in particular emerging in the past few years (Banister and Leadbeater 2007; Deutsch et al. 2007; DuBois et al. 2008; Kuperminc et al. 2007; Rhodes et al. 2008). The growth in gender-specific mentoring programs mirrors recent trends in the development of gender-specific prevention programs for adolescent girls more generally (c.f., LeCroy and Mann 2008). Such programs target specific risk factors that have been found to vary by gender, such as body dissatisfaction and problems associated with sexual behaviors (LeCroy 2005). Discussions of how gender may shape the youth mentoring process have been informed largely by research on the role of gender in adult mentoring relationships, gender differences in interpersonal relationships during childhood and adolescence, and feminist theories and research on girls' relationships (Bogat and Liang 2005). Based on these, it has been suggested that girls and women bring particular expectations and relational styles to the mentoring process (Liang and Grossman 2007) and that mentoring may work differently for girls than for boys (Rhodes et al. 2008).

The present qualitative interview study addresses some of the current assumptions about connections between female youths and their adult mentors by examining the nature of a small group of such relationships. Rather than seeking to explore whether there are gender differences in mentoring relationships, this approach allowed for new insights about female relationships to be generated from the close examination and exploration of the participants' own narratives about their experiences in, and understandings of, these relationships (Way and Pahl 1999). Examining processes within gender groups has yielded rich insights into how gender shapes other arenas of adolescent development, such as girls' and boys' identity development (e.g., Brown and Gilligan 1992; Chu 2004), experiences of and behaviors in romantic relationships (Tolman 2002; Tolman et al. 2004), and boys' friendships (Way 1995, 1998). Similarly, we expected that a "within-group" approach could prove fruitful in elucidating girls' mentoring relationships.

Expectations for Emotional Intimacy

The literature on interpersonal relationships in childhood and adolescence has documented girls' expectations for emotional intimacy in friendships as characterized by their tendency to express emotions outwardly (Saarni 1999), to show high levels of empathy and disclosure (Buhrmester 1990; Clark and Ayers 1993) and to form intimate ties early in their friendships (Greenberger and McLaughlin 1998). Further, girls tend to talk with their friends about their feelings and problems, placing a high value on mutual support in their close relationships (Caldwell and Peplau 1982; Frey and Rothlisberger 1996). Feminist theorists and researchers have emphasized the importance of feeling emotionally connected in interpersonal relationships for girls and women (e.g., Brown and Gilligan 1992; Jordan et al. 1991). Emotional intimacy tends to develop over time and thus it has been suggested that females may expect their mentoring relationships to last a long time, as well as feel more satisfied with enduring versus short-term relationships (Rhodes et al. 2008).

Relational Styles

Given that female relationships are characterized by emotional intimacy, it has been suggested that girls may benefit from relationships with adult female mentors that emphasize self-disclosure and empathy, whereas boys are more likely to benefit from engagement in shared activities with adult men (Bogat and Liang 2005; Rhodes 2002; Sullivan 1996). This distinction has been made in part due to the identification of two major approaches to the mentoring relationship—psychosocial and instrumental (Flaxman et al. 1988). Instrumental mentoring is typically defined as a relationship characterized by problem-solving and practical skill building; that is, the mentor helps the protégée develop particular skills to achieve specific goals or to cope more effectively with problems. In contrast, psychosocial approaches tend to emphasize the interpersonal relationship that forms between the mentor and protégée which is believed to then influence the developing personal characteristics of the youth.

It has been suggested that a psychosocial approach to mentoring relationships may be more appropriate for girls than an instrumental one, in that the focus of adolescent girls' mentoring relationships may need to be more on fostering connectedness and less on developing autonomy (Bogat and Liang 2005). Similarly, Sullivan (1996) juxtaposes a helping, or more instrumental, model of mentoring relationships to the relational one she believes to be more typical between women and girls. Whereas the instrumental model places the mentor in the role of an experienced guide or teacher, the relational model emphasizes the bi-directional nature of relational processes.

However, despite this tendency to associate emotion-focused relationships with girls to the exclusion of activity-focused or instrumental types of relationships, existing research on influential relationships with non-parental adults indicates that both psychosocial and instrumental emphases may be relevant to girls' mentoring relationships. A small body of empirical work supports the importance of focusing

on the psychosocial aspects of the mentoring relationship irrespective of gender, citing the central importance of the emotional bond that forms between youth and mentor (Rhodes 2002). Moreover, studies on the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs—even those that are focused on promoting school success—have indicated that feelings of closeness and emotional support are key ingredients of mentoring relationships that are associated with improvements in girls' functioning (DuBois et al. 2002b; Herrera et al. 2000). At the same time, a small set of studies suggests that instrumental components such as role modeling and coaching, which serve to nurture the talents and abilities of the adolescent, are also critical for girls (Darling et al. 1994). Indeed, Darling (2005) has even argued that for girls and boys alike, instrumental mentoring, which includes skill and knowledge development through teaching and challenging youth protégés, may become even more important than psychosocial mentoring in later adolescence when youth have more opportunities to receive emotional support from their peers and romantic partners.

Liang and colleagues (2002, 2006) have extended research on psychosocial or relational mentoring into the lives of college-aged women. These two studies examined the role of specific relational qualities in natural mentoring relationships, namely empathy, engagement, authenticity, empowerment, and tolerance of conflict. They found that Asian and White college women who perceived their mentoring relationships to have high levels of these qualities, compared to those with low levels of these qualities, tended to have higher self esteem and less loneliness. These findings, however, cannot be taken to mean that other types of mentoring styles are unimportant to college women as measures of instrumental mentoring were not included.

Some research on workplace mentoring has found that female mentors tend to emphasize emotional support (Allen and Eby 2004; Burke et al. 1993; Ragins and Cotton 1999). At the same time, their mentoring relationships were no less characterized by career mentoring than were those of male or mixed-gender dyads. Studies that focus on emotional support may seem to imply that women need, desire, or benefit more from psychosocial mentoring than other styles of mentoring, such as instrumental styles. An alternative explanation, however, may be that mentors *believe* that women need or desire this style of mentoring more than other types due to gender role stereotypes. Thus, it appears that upon closer examination, limited research on youth, workplace, and academic mentoring does not definitively suggest that females singularly desire or benefit from psychosocial mentoring versus a combination of styles.

How Mentoring Works

In addition to styles of mentoring, it has also been suggested that gender may shape the processes through which mentoring influences youth outcomes. Rhodes and colleagues (2008) found that the female participants in a national study of community-based one-to-one mentoring programs tended to report feelings of distrust and alienation toward their parents. Thus, they posited that girls may find a close relationship with a female adult mentor especially supportive and beneficial.

Feminist researchers have asserted that strong relationships between adolescent girls and adult women can promote healthy psychosocial development by serving as sources of resistance against cultural forces associated with sexism and stereotypical beliefs about femininity (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Sullivan 1996; Taylor et al. 1995). Helping girls develop a healthy critical perspective on societal messages about gender is thought to protect girls from threats to their self-esteem posed by existing social structures. Unfortunately, relationships between girls and women can also serve to reify gender stereotypes, as was found to be the case in one observational study of a group-based mentoring program for adolescent girls (Bay-Cheng et al. 2006).

Present Study

The goal of the present study was to examine adolescent girls' and adult women's understandings of their experiences in on-going formal mentoring relationships in light of the hypothesized qualities of these relationships highlighted in the literature. Given that there has been relatively little empirical examination of female youth mentoring relationships, especially from the perspectives of the program participants, a qualitative approach was taken in this study. In-depth interviews with adolescent girls and adult women conducted as a part of a larger study of relational processes in close and enduring male and female youth mentoring relationships (Spencer 2006) were analyzed. Two broad questions were pursued: (1) what is the nature of the enduring ties between the female adult mentors and adolescent protégées?; and, (2) what links, if any, do these participants make between different dimensions of these relationships and the psychological development of the adolescent girls?

Method

For the present study, in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with adolescent girls and their adult female mentors were analyzed. These data were collected for a larger study of relational processes in close and enduring male and female youth mentoring relationships (Spencer 2006), which yielded a set of themes derived from and applicable to both male and female relationships. A separate analysis of the male relationships (Spencer 2003, 2007) was conducted previous to the present study of female relationships (Spencer 2004).

Participants

Twelve pairs of female adolescents and adults ($N = 24$; see Table 1 for details on each pair) who had been in a mentoring relationship for a minimum of 1 year were interviewed. These mentoring relationships, which ranged from 2.5 to 11 years in length ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 2.68$), had been established through the Big Sister Association of Greater Boston, a large urban community-based formal mentoring program. The background characteristics of these pairs were typical of participants

Table 1 Age and racial and ethnic background of mentors and protégées and length of mentoring relationship

Names[a] (age in years)	Race/Ethnicity	Match length (years)
Alison (29)	White	2.5
Amy (14)	Italian	
Anna (29)	White	3
Marie (13)	White	
Celine (45)	White	3.5
Lauren (14)	White	
Gretchen (55)	White	11
Milo (17)	White	
Jasper (40)	White	8
Danela (17)	Portuguese	
Jules (32)	White	5.5
Leigh (13)	White	
Katherine (31)	White	3
Margaret (13)	Puerto Rican, White	
Lee (54)	White	5.5
S (14)	White	
Rebecca (43)	White	5
Annie (15)	White	
Shelly (29)	White	3
Rachel (15)	White	
Sophie (28)	White	3
LS Shadow (16)	Spanish	
Tiffany (49)	White	8
Elizabeth (17)	Puerto Rican, Black, White	

Note: Identification provided by the participants

[a] Names selected by the participants

in this program and others like it (Tierney et al. 1995). All of the adult mentors were White and 28–55 years of age ($M = 38.67$, $SD = 10.30$). The adolescents ranged in age from 13 to 17 years ($M = 14.83$, $SD = 1.59$) and were a racially and ethnically diverse group of eight White, two Latina, and two bi- or multi-racial girls. They had been referred to the agency by friends and family members or child protective services case workers. Participants selected their own pseudonyms by which they are referred to in this paper. Other identifying information (e.g., the names of specific places or people) has been changed.

Procedure

The program through which the study participants were recruited was selected due to its adherence to the current best practices for enduring and effective mentoring

relationships. These best practices include screening and training mentors, asking pairs to make an initial 1 year commitment to the relationship, and on-going support for the mentoring matches (DuBois et al. 2002a; MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership 2003). The stated goal of this program is to facilitate supportive, nurturing, and enduring one-to-one relationships between female adult volunteers and girls interested in having such a relationship in their lives. Mentors are expected to meet with their youth protégés regularly (three to four times per month) and build friendships that are expected to lead to the kind of positive benefits associated with close, personal mentoring connections. Agency case managers were asked to select pairs who had been continuously matched for a minimum of 1 year and whose relationships they believed had positively influenced the lives of the girls. The case managers made the initial contact with the selected mentors and then contacted their protégés after determining which mentors were interested in participating. Parental consent was obtained prior to, and participant assent at the time of, the interview. Each adult participant was given a pair of movie passes and each adolescent a gift certificate to a local music store at the time the interview was completed.

Interview Process

Each of the 12 mentor–youth pairs participated in an in-depth (Johnson 2002) semi-structured (Seidman 1991) interview conducted by the first author either in a university office or in the home of the adult or the adolescent, depending on the preference of the participants. These interviews lasted 1½ to 2 h. The mentors and youth were interviewed separately for approximately 30 min each, and then interviewed together for approximately 30 min. This provided three different perspectives on these relationships by allowing mentors and youth to express privately their thoughts and feelings, as well as to reflect together on their experiences. The pair interviews further allowed the interviewer to observe how the mentors and youth interacted with and responded to one another, offering another window into the nature and quality of these relationships.

The interview protocols, designed to elicit the adolescents' and the adult mentors' descriptions of these relationships and how they experienced and understood them, were used primarily as a guide, allowing the interviewer to follow the narratives of each individual interviewee. Both the mentors and protégés, individually, were asked questions covering topics such as expectations going into the relationship, memories of their first meeting, typical activities the pairs engaged in, special or memorable times, times of conflict or stress, how long they anticipated the relationship continuing, and whether and what kinds of support the relationship had provided to the adolescent. When interviewed together, the pairs were asked to describe memorable moments in their relationship and any turning points they could identify. These open-ended questions were followed by additional questions intended to facilitate further exploration of the particular experiences identified by the interviewees. All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. All transcriptions were verified, a process that involved listening to the tapes in full and making any necessary corrections to the transcripts.

Analysis

Employing a holistic-content approach (Lieblich et al. 1998), thematic analyses of the three-part interviews (adolescent alone, adult alone, and the pair together) were conducted with the transcripts from each pair using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. In this approach, themes are identified by examining one interview at a time, often through multiple readings, and looking for emerging patterns. This facilitates the identification of major themes while maintaining a consideration of the larger context within which these themes are embedded.

A set of initial themes was identified and grouped into five larger categories: shared activities, emotional support, companionship, collaboration, and improvements in the girls' psychosocial functioning. Once these categories and themes had been identified, a second analyst coded the interviews for these themes and also identified new themes, which were then discussed with the first coder until agreement could be reached on the definition, presence, and salience of each theme. Following the identification of major themes, conceptually clustered matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994) were then constructed. A matrix, or chart, was constructed for each category, with the coded quotations from all of the participants associated with this category entered into the matrix. This conceptual grouping of the categories allowed for the further examination and refinement of the themes within each category and across the pairs, yielding the three conceptually distinct but interrelated processes detailed below.

Findings

Within the context of the significant work and child-rearing demands on the parents of these adolescent girls, the mentoring relationships appeared to fill a number of important needs. These relationships were perceived by both the adult and adolescent participants as encouraging the positive development of the girls through three sets of interrelated processes: (1) engaged and authentic emotional support; (2) the development of new skills and confidence through collaborations; and, (3) experiences of companionship that provided relief from daily stresses. Findings related to each of these processes will be elaborated below. Additional exemplar quotes are provided in Table 2.

Engaged and Authentic Emotional Support

The emotional support these mentoring relationships provided emerged as a dominant theme across the interviews. Assertions like "I can tell her anything" and "we talk about everything" were peppered throughout the girls' narratives. Similarly, many of the women talked about hoping from the start of the relationship that they would become someone to whom their protégée could turn when she needed someone to listen. These potential platitudes were expanded on throughout their narratives in ways that revealed these relationships were indeed offering a rich, complex, and apparently rare form of emotional support for many of these girls.

Table 2 Themes and exemplar quotes

Themes	Exemplar quotes	
	Youth	Mentors
Engaged and authentic emotional support	"But when I was ever emotionally hurt … if I had a fight with my mom or my brother or just was going through a hard time with school and friends and work…then I'd go to her, you know, and just have a lot to say and I'd just spill everything out and she'd listen. … And then she would talk to me about it or she'd just sit there and listen, which is what I needed, just someone to sit there and listen to me." (Leigh)	"She (protégée) has a lot of anger issues. So….my thing about it is just trying to be sort of calming and … get her to a point where she can think about what she's really feeling or thinking about something rather than just the yelling part." (Shelly)
	"And if I like, have an argument with my mother … and there's trouble, I call her and I'll go spend the night at her house. It's cool. I like that." (Rachel)	"I think she just sees me as … a really good friend and just somebody that she can count on. I'm not going to yell at her but I'm not going to agree with you know, …. she just she knows she can talk to me about anything." (Gretchen)
	"I can tell her all my secrets … I can tell her anything, and she like…whenever there's something not so good, she tells me like – she talks to me about it, and she helps me out, she doesn't yell or anything." (Shadow)	"she knows that I'm always gonna be there…she has my phone number, she know where I live.. she sleeps over sometimes. … she can e- mail me. … when there's trouble, she can get a hold of me. … I mean, not like a mom, 'cause she has a mom. …But – but I think she tells me some things … that she doesn't tell her mom." (Tiffany)

Table 2 continued

Themes	Exemplar quotes	
	Youth	Mentors
Development of new skills and confidence	"she gave me skills … Like, before I met her, I'd talk to nobody. So, it would be like, if someone would say hi to me I'd just look at them and not say anything." (Amy)	"maybe before she didn't know she could do it. You know … before.. 'I can't do it, I can't do it, I'm stupid, I can't do it.' Okay maybe now it's 'I don't know how to do it, how can I figure out how to do it then.'" (Jules)
	"I was not doing so well in French last year. Cause it's like…I have to learn English and then I have to learn French, too… and I was not doing so well. And um, she had taken French when she went to school so she had all these French books and stuff left over from school and she helped me out and so…now I'm not doing so badly." (Lauren)	"… when I was first with her, she couldn't tie her shoes. And a few other things gave me the …sense that her parents do a lot for her. Her parents and maybe her sisters. You know, don't challenge her to do stuff. … I think she feel she may feel … kind of a sense of more of independence or accomplishment with me because I tend to have her do things." (Lee)
	"She always tries to help me learn things." (Leigh)	
	"Like when…I say I'm afraid that I'm gonna fail on the test and stuff, she's just like, "I'll help you study it. Bring the book, we'll study it, I'll quiz you on it and stuff." (Elizabeth)	"[Protégée was] not working, not in school. So one day I was flipping through the local paper and I saw this ad for a helper at … the vet I go to. Called [protégée] up, she said oh, great, give me the phone number. … she got the job. And she's working over there … and she loves it." (Gretchen)

Table 2 continued

Themes	Exemplar quotes	
	Youth	Mentors
Companionship	"She's exciting to be with. She's really fun." (Marie)	"She's just fun. She's just so funny." (Anna)
	"It felt like I was on vacation across the world, you know. Like I didn't have to deal with anyone … It was so fun." (Milo)	"I feel like we're just kind of buddies and just enjoying each other's company and maybe being a little diversion for a couple hours." (Celine)
	"No matter what we do, we have fun together." (Leigh)	"We were really buddies." (Jasper)
	"we always have fun." (S)	"I mean, I consider her a friend of mine. We just do a lot of things that are fun." (Katherine)
	"It's a good escape from, you know, life, that we can go do stuff. So … that's good." (Lauren)	"I look forward to … spending time with her because it's fun. I actually enjoy myself." (Sophie)

One protégée, Milo, 17 years old and White, described her mentor's high level of engagement with her emotional life. Noting that her mentor, Gretchen, would "make time" for her when she called, she also described the manner in which Gretchen engaged with her during these moments and the impact it had on her.

> I feel that she's talking to me as I'm a human being and not yelling at me. Like, me and my parents get into arguments, you know, we yell at each other and stuff like that. When I talk to her, her voice is never raised. It doesn't go any other way ….. she was talking to me as the way I feel that I want to be talked to. I don't want you yelling in my face, and stuff like that. Talk to me like you want to be talked to. …When I call her … I feel so much better. After I get off the phone with her, I go for a little walk and then I go home. Everything's fine.

Milo's exchanges with Gretchen appeared to be supporting her emotional development on a number of levels. They offered a contrast to the more emotionally charged exchanges she described having with her parents. Her narrative also revealed that her exchanges with Gretchen offered her something that is increasingly being viewed as critical to healthy psychological development—opportunities for assistance with emotional regulation (Cole et al. 2004). Milo described Gretchen engaging with her and her problems in a way that helped her to develop greater clarity about her feelings, that helped her to settle these feelings, and that then allowed her to employ some self-soothing techniques, here in the form of going for a walk to further calm down.

In addition, Milo indicated that Gretchen's responses stayed with her, allowing her to draw from their conversations later.

> [W]hen she says stuff, it sticks…. if it came from my parents, in one ear and out the other. …I'm not degrading my parents, I love them to death. But my parents have four kids. …. she gives me more attention, more affection than my parents do. …Yeah, I listen to her, you know, and we can talk. And that's what I want with my parents, but they have four kids, you know, and it's a little bit harder.

Milo, like several of the other girls, understood that her parents' difficulties engaging with her in the way that her mentor did was partly attributable to their many competing obligations, including in Milo's case three other children who were also in need of their attention.

In addition to being reliable, available, respectful, and engaged, these girls also emphasized how important it was that their mentors shared their opinions and were honest with them in their advice. As Margaret, 13 years old and bi-racial, said about her mentor,

> I can talk to Katherine, … I always know that I can go to her whenever I have a problem or I always know that I can get help from her. … I know that she knows what's right and wrong and sometimes I don't know what right and wrong is. So I can ask her and she'll tell me. … plus, she'll support me in it. She won't just give me an answer and leave me hanging. She'll ask about it

> the next week and say "how did it go … how was my advice?" And it always works.

Both Margaret and her mentor, Katherine, talked about how Katherine was authentic in her responses—that she was honest and would speak her mind in a way that was respectful of Margaret. As Katherine said, "She knows that I'm going to tell her what I think, either way. … she knows that first and foremost … I'm going to try to understand where she's coming from."

The ability of these mentors to listen, respond with genuine thoughts and opinions, and refrain from passing judgment on the girls for their choices, made for a particularly powerful form of emotional support. As one protégée, Annie (13 years old and White), described it:

> Like to know somebody's there for you, and like they won't reject you or …. look at you different. And they just see you for who you are. … you can tell them everything, and …it doesn't matter. …they're there for you. It's … comforting, you know? … you don't have to worry about … I mean like you don't … really care about … things that are bothering you. Cause … you know stuff's gonna get better. … somebody there to remind you that everything's gonna be okay.

Part of what may have allowed these adult women to listen in this way was being freed from the responsibilities of parenting. They could be more of a friend, and their relationships with their protégées did not carry many of the complexities inherent in relationships between parents and children. In addition, these conversations tended to happen in the context of sharing a fun activity, such as going to the mall or to getting an ice cream sundae. For many of these girls, their mentors had the luxury of being able to spend lengthy amounts of time alone with them, something their stretched parents were often less able to offer.

Developing New Skills and Building Confidence through Collaborations

Also apparent in the participants' narratives was the importance of the instrumental support offered by these relationships, which typically involved the mentors helping the girls develop a variety of new skills. For one mentor, Celine, encouraging her protégée to try new things was an outgrowth of her underlying interest in boosting her protégée's confidence:

> She'd never been on skates before. … we went to this rink and just like, "oh, I don't know if I can do it, I'm scared." And I said, "well, just hang onto the wall here. I'll hang onto you." And …she hung onto the wall a couple times around and then she held onto me, and then she was fine by herself. And it's like, wow, that's really neat. So … it felt good that I kind of encouraged her to try these things."

Her protégée, Lauren, 14 years old and White, also described specific times when Celine had offered her both encouragement and assistance with a particularly challenging task. For example, Lauren described Celine's response when she was

faced with challenges in her schoolwork, "if you tell Celine, … she'll just say well, maybe I can help you. If you want we can have like a study date or something. We'll…get some popcorn or something and we'll just study so we can fix that." Her mentor's response encouraged Lauren to reach out for help and also conveyed to Lauren that tackling problems can be fun. Moreover, Celine not only verbally expressed support, but acted on it by actually assisting Lauren with homework, creating more opportunities for learning as they sat down and worked through assignments together.

Another mentor, Jules, had also worked to instill in her protégée, Leigh (13 years old and White), a general problem-solving philosophy and greater self-confidence by joining her in her learning process.

> I have said to her over and over again. …she's like, "I can't do that." I'm like, it's not that you can't do it, it's you don't know how to do it. Let's figure out how to do it. … so it's sort of like you know, maybe before she didn't know she could do it.

Jules' support went beyond reframing. She acted in concrete ways to assist Leigh in developing the skills she needed to accomplish her goals. When Leigh froze-up during a school musical audition, Jules responded by having the two of them sing together throughout the following summer. She worked to help alleviate Leigh's feelings of anxiety about singing in front of others, by making a game of it and singing with her into hairbrushes. Ultimately, Leigh successfully landed a part in the school musical the next year and Jules attended the performance. When asked to imagine her life if she had not met Jules, Leigh responded,

> I don't think [I] …would have as big of an ego as I do now. I don't think I would have a lot of self confidence … because she has taught me to go out and just do things as best as you can, no matter what happens …before I used to be really afraid.

Jules' expectation that Leigh was capable of learning to sing in front of others, coupled with her active partnership in helping Leigh overcome her fears, exemplified the kind of collaborative approach taken by several other mentors. Sophie, responded similarly when her protégée, Shadow (16 years old and Latina), showed her a report card with poor grades. Aware that Shadow was dissatisfied with her own performance, Sophie recounted telling Shadow:

> "It would be one thing if … you weren't capable …You're completely capable. … we go to movies, you figure them out, you explain them to me … you're completely capable." And she was like, "I know." … so I said to her, "Let's strike up a deal." … she'd never been to New York City. So I said to her … "If you can get C's or better." Which, I mean, to some people that might not be acceptable, but that would be a good thing. … I said, "We'll go to … New York City … Get me all your teachers' names," and I wrote letters back and forth, gave 'em, you know, self addressed envelopes…. just really like, kept on her as far as like, her grades. And she pulled all A's and B's. So that was … really cool.

In addition to offering a coveted reward, Sophie involved herself in the process, communicating with Shadow's teachers and letting Shadow know that she was invested and interested in her progress. Ultimately, Shadow received an award at her 8th grade graduation for being the most improved and Sophie attended the ceremony.

Companionship and a Break from the World

Another important facet of these relationships was the opportunity for companionship. The pairs described how they enjoyed spending time together and seemed to take pleasure in one another's company. Most of the girls were interested in getting a mentor because they thought it would be "fun" and the word fun repeatedly appeared throughout the narratives of both the adults and the adolescents. Amy, 14 years old and White, said about her mentor, "it's a lot of fun with her." Leigh, speaking about her mentor, said "No matter what we do we have fun together." For Dannela, 17 years old and Latina, this aspect of the relationship was a major reason she encouraged a friend of hers to get a mentor, "I told her to get a Big Sister 'cause it's fun and you do a lot of fun things." Sophie, a mentor, described her experience in this way: "I look forward to … spending time with her because it's fun. I actually enjoy myself." Another mentor, Tiffany, said, "she's funny, she makes me laugh … she's just … good company."

These fun times were important for the adolescent girls, in part, because they provided an escape from the stresses and strains of their daily lives. For some girls, outings with their mentors represented rare opportunities to go out socially. As one protégée, Margaret, said, "she'll take me out and we'll have some fun and we'll go out and you know, have pizza, hang out, you know. As friends, you know. And it feels good to have a friend that I can actually go out with." Another protégée, Lauren, said that the time she spent with her mentor was "a good escape from you know, life, that we can go do stuff." Annie's remark about her mentor echoes this sentiment: "Like, she gives me a break from the world, you know? It's like, I go out with her, and just like, I don't have any other worries. … it just like … clears your mind."

Although it was almost exclusively the youth who spoke about the welcome respite these relationships provided, one mentor, Celine, had noted the importance of this to her protégée, "I feel like we're just kind of buddies and just enjoying each other's company and maybe being a little diversion for a couple hours." These relationships also provided a couple of the adults with a kind of escape—in their case, an escape from the confines of the adult world. One mentor, Lee, said "And it's fun, it's always been fun with S (her protégée). I do things that I probably wouldn't do." Another mentor, Tiffany, said, "Well, she's fun. She makes me laugh. She keeps me young.… I do things that I wouldn't do …. if I … wasn't with her." Across the board, these pairs described how much they enjoyed spending time together. As Dannela said about her mentor, "I really like Jasper. She is the best friend in the world."

Interrelatedness of Emotional Connection, Collaborations and Companionship

Within these relationships, there was an easy flow of moments of shared fun in which the adult was also offering support and encouragement. For example, one mentor (Tiffany) responded to the interviewer's question to the mentor–youth pair about their activities by saying, "we talk about cars," which led into banter between the two that revealed the ways that Tiffany was supporting her protégée Elizabeth in obtaining her driver's license. Amidst discussion about how Tiffany teased Elizabeth by calling her a "chicken" because she was afraid she was "gonna crash it into something," it became apparent that Tiffany was planning to help Elizabeth practice her driving. Moreover, she had normalized Elizabeth's fears by letting her know she felt similarly when she got her own license and still did at times.

Several of these girls spoke of the critical importance of being in a relationship with an adult who listened to them, knew and liked them, believed in and helped them, and simply wanted to spend time with them. They viewed this kind of relationship as a crucial part of their own psychological well-being, and believed it to be crucial for others their own age. Spending time together regularly with their mentors and engaging in fun activities created on-going opportunities to connect with one another in new ways. It also created openings for the mentors to provide a range of supports, whether in the form of a listening ear, a driving coach, or academic tutor. Having fun together also seemed to create opportunities for these adolescents to be on equal footing with their mentors and to share in a mutual understanding and knowledge of one another. As one mentor, Sophie, noted, "I mean, it's such a joy … to be with her now. … it's really nice, 'cause like I see her and we just talk … like I'll talk to one of my friends."

The strong emotional bond these pairs had forged coupled with the clear and active investment these mentors had in fostering the development of their protégées seemed to render the support provided especially potent and meaningful. These mentors had become significant and influential adults who had a pervasive impact on their protégées. As Milo admitted,

> When I know I'm about to get into trouble, the first thing that comes in my head is Gretchen. You know, I don't want to go to jail and call up Gretchen one night, 'hey, Gretchen,' you know, 'I'm down [at the] police department, can you come and bail me out.' No, no, no. I don't think so.

Another girl, Marie, found that her relationship with her mentor increased her motivation to perform well in school:

> "if like, you're struggling in school …, it just makes you want to do better cause you know you have someone there … to talk to about anything. I think it's just cause…the feeling that you know you have someone. So it makes a difference.

Several girls also spoke to the abiding impact they imagined these relationships having on their lives. When asked how long she anticipated her relationship with her mentor lasting, Shadow responded, "like even if I move away or she moves away … I'll always keep her in mind."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine in-depth the relational processes at work in a small group of enduring and successful mentoring relationships between adolescent girls and adult women from the perspectives of the participants themselves. Consistent with previous literature on interpersonal relationships in childhood and adolescence, adult and youth participants in this study similarly emphasized the important role that emotional support played in the mentoring relationship. The depth of the emotional connections that had been forged and the significant emotional support these relationships offered the girls were apparent in these narratives. The women's active and engaged interest in the girls' lives coupled with their authentic and non-judgmental presence seemed to make their advice particularly meaningful in the eyes of these girls.

The narratives of these pairs also highlight how these relationships were experienced by the participants as promoting the development of the girls' skills and competencies in myriad ways. Particularly striking was the collaborative nature of these efforts. The notion of instrumental support in mentoring relationships may seem to convey a one-way process—the adult offers support to the child. However, these pairs were engaging in a process akin to Rogoff's (1990) notion of guided participation, in which the adult partners or joins in the process of working with the child to meet her goals, offers scaffolding to expand the reach of the child and actively contributes to the learning, thereby enhancing the likelihood of success. This process also bore a greater resemblance to the bi-directional conceptualization of mentoring reflected in relational models, which have been contrasted with more traditional notions of mentoring (Liang et al. 2002; Sullivan 1996).

Engaging in fun social activities together was also described as an important part of these mentoring relationships—one that distinguishes them from relationships with parents, teachers, coaches, therapists, and other important adults. These "fun" experiences provided opportunities for relaxation and laughter as well as respite from the stresses of daily life. The importance of positive emotions for healthy development is receiving increasing attention (e.g., Isen 2003). Indeed, some social support researchers have distinguished companionship support, or engaging in leisure activities with someone you like and who you know likes you, from other forms of support called upon in times of need (Rook 1995). Considered by some social support researchers to be a distinct aspect of close relationships, companionship is believed to contribute to an on-going state of emotional well-being, enhancing the pleasure experienced in everyday life (Rook and Underwood 2000).

Having fun together is a theme that has been emphasized by youth when they are asked to identify what is meaningful to them about their relationships with important adults (Liang et al. 2008; Parra et al. 2002; Spencer et al. 2004). This dimension has been examined in only a couple of other recently published research studies (Liang et al. 2008; Spencer 2006), which may reflect the tendency to emphasize other aspects of mentoring, such as opportunities for learning or guidance. For many of the girls in this study, however, opportunities to immerse themselves in the pleasure of fun moments, shared with an adult companion who

was interested in and cared about them, were experiences that seemed to be emotionally enhancing in and of themselves.

The implications of this finding for mentoring specifically, and prevention programs more generally, include paying attention to the *context* in which learning and guidance take place for youth. In the setting of fun activities, youth may be more receptive to other aspects of an intervention. This finding does not suggest that fun should be emphasized over serious commitment. Rather, these girls expressed enjoyment in sharing fun activities with caring adults who were deeply invested in them. There are many opportunities for practitioners to bolster this notion of "commitment-rich fun" throughout the life cycle of the mentoring relationship, including during volunteer recruitment, assessments, training and on-going match support. Future studies should further query girls about what types of interactions constitute "fun." Volunteer mentors may assume that "fun" means spending a lot of money on particular activities (M. Roberts, personal communication, October 6, 2008). Our findings, however, seem to suggest that girls enjoy trying new things in the context of close and supportive relationships.

The in-depth picture of the relationships in this study suggests that the common distinction between the instrumental and psychosocial aspects of mentoring relationships may be occluding the interactive nature of these processes, particularly in close and enduring relationships. The distinction between instrumental and psychosocial aspects is often made in order to argue for paying greater attention to the emotional and relational aspects of mentoring, or to encourage a focus on the quality of the relationship itself and its bi-directional nature (Bogat and Liang 2005; Liang et al. 2002; Sullivan 1996). These are certainly important points. However, emphasizing one or the other aspect of mentoring relationships may prevent us from seeing what is likely to be their more complex and multi-dimensional nature. Among the pairs in this study, close connections appeared to increase the likelihood that the youth would ask for assistance or that the adult would identify a need. Moreover, instrumental support effectively offered may have further deepened the emotional connection between these pairs, as the adolescent's confidence in the adult and the adult's investment in the child increased. Keller (2005), in his discussion of the developmental stages of mentoring relationships, also notes that these different dimensions may be working together and reinforcing one another in various ways over the course of the life of a mentoring relationship.

Therefore, programs serving girls should be cautious about prioritizing emotional support over instrumental support, or assuming that instrumental support may undermine more collaborative or bi-directional relationships between female youth and adult program participants. Instead, attention should be given to integrating various types of support in interventions for girls, as instrumental and psychosocial support may play a synergistic role in the change process. Future research should examine the relative contribution of these different types of support to the efficacy of mentoring relationships and further explore the ways they may work together to promote positive change in the lives of adolescent girls.

It is important to highlight the limitations of this study, given its nature and scope. These pairs were selected from one formal mentoring program dedicated to serving girls and women. Moreover, only females in highly successful relationships

were invited to participate in this study. Thus, the findings here offer in-depth insights into a small and unique sample of female mentoring relationships that are working well and suggest areas of further study rather than providing generalizable findings and conclusive guidance for mentoring programs. Although examining only female pairs allowed for exploration of processes within this group of matches, the findings here do not address questions about whether mentoring processes differ by gender. Given the lack of empirical study of the role of gender in the mentoring process more generally, assertions about gender-based differences should be made cautiously.

The findings from this study do however challenge us to consider the potential inter-relatedness of instrumental and psychosocial support in mentoring and other forms of potentially growth-promoting relationships. These female pairs tended to speak more frequently about instances of emotional support than about moments when they worked together to assist the girls with acquiring a new skill. However, we should be cautious about concluding that the emotional aspects of these relationships are of greater importance, as such conclusions may reflect our own biases about what we expect from female relationships more than what adolescent girls need for positive social and emotional development. The mentoring relationships examined here appeared to promote active agency for these girls, although the importance of the warm and authentic relational context within which this occurred should not be downplayed. Girls themselves may be more likely to ask explicitly for emotional support than instrumental support. However, it is clear that close and enduring mentoring relationships have the potential to also offer a multitude of opportunities for women to partner with girls in encouraging their interests and developing their skills, so as to foster their overall competency in the world.

Acknowledgments This research was supported in part by funds given by the Adolescent & Youth Dissertation Award Program for research at the Henry A. Murray Research Center of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and the Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Primary Prevention Initiatives: Empowering Children for Life, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College. The writing of this manuscript was supported in part by a W. T. Grant Foundation Scholar Award to the first author. Special thanks to the Big Sister Association of Greater Boston for their generous participation and to Gina Lazar and Stacey Schamber for their assistance with this research.

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