



Research Corner: *Research Roundup*

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Background

Despite their shared interests, researchers and practitioners in the field of mentoring often occupy separate worlds. Practitioners don't always base their program decisions on the latest scientific research—not out of any intent to ignore findings but simply because such rigorous studies are in short supply. Indeed, although thousands of practitioners are involved in setting up a wide range of mentoring programs, a much smaller group of people dedicate themselves to research on the topic. Moreover, the rich information that researchers do uncover often remains elusive to the very people who could benefit from it most. Researchers tend to publish their work in arcane journals that are available only through costly subscriptions or affiliations with academic libraries.

The purpose of this month's Research Corner is to break down some of these barriers by surveying the latest findings on youth mentoring. In the following sections, I review some of the published studies conducted from 2000-2002 and discuss their application to mentoring relationships and programs.

Understanding mentoring relationships

Although several outcome studies have emerged in recent years, more information is needed about the subtleties of mentoring, including how the relationships are experienced by the mentors and mentees. With qualitative research (which includes in-depth interviews, case studies, observations, etc.), researchers can gain relatively extensive, first-hand knowledge of some of the facets of mentoring relationships that, were they to use traditional methods, might be more difficult to obtain.

Four studies of mentoring were recently published:

- **Study 1:** Philip, K. & Hendry, L. B. (2001). Making sense of mentoring or mentoring making sense? Reflections on the mentoring process by adults mentors with young people.
- **Study 2:** DuBois, D. (2002). Life imitates and informs meta-analysis: A participatory approach to increasing understanding of effective youth mentoring practices.
- **Study 3:** Soucy, N. & Larose, S. (2000). Attachment and control in family and mentoring contexts as determinants of adolescent adjustment to college.

- **Study 4:** Darling, N., Hamilton, S., Toyokawa, T., & Matsudu, S. (2000). Naturally Occurring Mentoring in Japan and the United States: Social Roles and Correlates.

Understanding Mentoring Relationships: Study 1

Philip, K. & Hendry, L. B. (2001). Making sense of mentoring or mentoring making sense? Reflections on the mentoring process by adults mentors with young people. Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 10, 211-223

In this study, a team of British researchers interviewed both mentees and their mentors, in depth, to find out how they perceived their mentoring relationships in terms of how those relationships were initiated, sustained, experienced and terminated.

Study

From a sample of over 1,150 Scottish youth aged 13 through 18, the researchers selected a representative sub-sample of 30. The researchers interviewed 30 mentors and conducted two focus group interviews (six months apart) with the mentees. Throughout this process, the researchers developed categories and found recurrent patterns and themes.

Findings

Mentors perceived the experience of being identified as a mentor and the processes of mentoring as being very positive. In particular, mentors noted several, related benefits including:

- Instilling a stronger sense of self efficacy;
- Providing insight into their own past experiences and the realities of youth's lives;
- Helping to build a set of skills in communication and empowerment; and
- Offering support, challenge and friendship.

The mentors who were considered most successful were characterized as "accepting young people on their own terms."

Reflections

The authors note that mentors interpreted their experiences as a form of "cultural capital" - helping them make connections between their own experience and that of young people. This finding has important implications for the design of mentoring interventions with young people, including the need to appreciate and convey the potential benefits to mentors.

Understanding mentoring relationships: Study 2

DuBois, D. (2002). Life imitates and informs meta-analysis: A participatory approach to increasing understanding of effective youth mentoring practices. Journal of Youth and Adolescence.

In this study, DuBois summarizes his recent meta-analysis of 55 evaluations of one-to-one youth mentoring. Based on the findings, he delineated empirically based "Best Practices" in mentoring programs, including:

- Monitoring of program implementation;
- Access to community setting for mentoring activities;
- Mentors whose background includes a helping role or profession;
- Expectations for frequency of contact;
- Ongoing training;
- Structured activities for the mentors and youth; and
- Parental support and involvement.

Study

DuBois builds on these findings by describing his experiences participating as a mentor for 15 months. He described his relationship with Marcus, a 9-year-old Little Brother from a single-parent, low-income family, as being marked by "easily observed feelings of mutual closeness and affection."

Findings and Reflections

DuBois' experiences and observations were consistent with many of the findings that emerged in the meta-analysis. In particular, he noted several program practices that helped him develop a strong and effective mentoring relationship with Marcus. Those practices included:

- Emphasis on careful matching - Both Dubois and Marcus had some limitations on the amount of physical activity in which they could engage. DuBois notes that with less astute matching these limitations "could be enough to derail the process of initial bonding."
- Recruiting mentors with helping roles or professions - Although not recruited specifically because of his background, Dubois noted that his background as a mental health professional did prove advantageous. It allowed him to understand and respond effectively to Marcus' concerns and to not feel overwhelmed by Marcus' close attachment to him (including occasionally referring to him as "dad").
- Supervision and training - DuBois notes that his pre-match training was particularly helpful, and that a mutual support group for mentors (a best practice identified in the meta-analysis, but missing from the program) would have been helpful.
- Agency-sponsored activities - Another "best practice" helped remove the burden of coming up with new things to do and provided a comfortable group setting for getting acquainted.

DuBois notes that the gains attributed to the relationship were modest and incremental: Although Marcus began to make fewer self-disparaging comments, his more long-standing and extensive academic difficulties were more difficult to change.

Understanding mentoring relationships: Study 3:

Soucy, N. & Larose, S. (2000). Attachment and control in family and mentoring contexts as determinants of adolescent adjustment to college. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14, 125-143.

Researchers have begun to examine how mentoring relationships interact with other relationships in youth's lives. There is some evidence, for example, that mentoring relationships can lead to improved parent-child relationships. In this study, researchers examined the link between adolescents' relationships with their parents and mentors and their adjustment to school.

Study

During the first semester, students participated in a ten-hour academic mentoring program in which volunteer teacher/mentors addressed different affective, social and academic issues. Data were collected at the beginning of the first semester and approximately seven months later when the mentoring program ended. The student participants answered questions about how secure they felt in their relationships with their parents and mentors, what they thought about the psychological and behavioral control their parents and mentors exerted over them and how well they thought they had adjusted to college.

Findings

- Above and beyond parent influence, mentor support helped predict how well an adolescent adjusted.
- Interestingly, adolescents who reported feeling secure in their relationships with their mothers also enjoyed stronger mentoring relationships. This finding suggests that support from a nonparent adult may be beneficial as long as the young person already enjoys a minimum level of support from at least one parent.

This suggests that positive ties with mentors may help to prevent the development of adjustment difficulties. At the same time, strong mentoring relationships cannot entirely compensate for insecure bonds developed within the family.

Reflections

Given the lack of comparison groups and the reliance on self-report (as opposed to actual grades, etc), these results should be interpreted with caution.

Nonetheless, the results are an important reminder of the need to consider other important relationships in the mentees' lives (most notably with parents) and the possibility that mentors are more likely to supplement parental support than compensate for its absence.

Mentors might fill needs (relationships to integrating to college) that cannot be fully met by parental expertise and may be due to shorter duration of mentoring.

Understanding mentoring relationships: Study 4:

Darling, N., Hamilton, S., Toyokawa, T., & Matsudu, S. (2000). Naturally Occurring Mentoring in Japan and the United States: Social Roles and Correlates. American Journal of Community Psychology, 30

Darling and her colleagues note that, although the definition of mentoring has traditionally focused on intergenerational relationships, mentoring might also occur among peers. Similarly, although researchers have emphasized the emotional, or affective, aspect of mentoring relationships, close relationships might also emerge as the by-product of shared involvement in social, academic, career or other activities (instrumental mentoring).

With these issues in mind, they examined:

- Roles of individuals who are nominated as natural mentors;
- Extent to which relationships described as high in the instrumental aspects of mentoring are also high in the affective qualities; and
- Whether mentoring relationships were the same in Japan and the United States.

Study

Youth participants from the U.S. and Japan (when readers click on participants the following should appear: Fifty-six male and 70 female college juniors from the United States and 119 male and 120 female college freshmen from Japan participated in the study) were asked to name the 10 most important people in their lives prior to the time they entered college. Participants then completed a checklist (describing their relationship and the activities that they participated in with their mentors, and provided background information about themselves and their families.

Findings

Several related findings emerged from this study.

- In both Japan and the United States, participating adolescents described mentoring as occurring more often with: adults than peers, relatives than non-relatives and mentors of the same gender.
- Relative to the others, non-parent adult relationships were least likely to be characterized by both emotional and instrumental functioning.

Reflections

The findings in the United States and Japan were strikingly similar, suggesting that mentoring relationships are relatively universal and that cross-national comparative research on mentoring is feasible.

Adolescents can recognize that unrelated adults can have an important influence on them even when the relationship is not characterized by a strong emotional bond.

Although the study results are intriguing, additional work is needed to understand whether mentoring is more effective when mentors have strong, positive emotional bonds with their mentee

Understanding Newer Forms of Mentoring

Although several outcome studies have emerged in recent years, more information is needed about the subtleties of mentoring, including how the relationships are experienced by the mentors and mentees. With qualitative research (which includes in-depth interviews, case studies, observations, etc.), researchers can gain relatively extensive, first-hand knowledge of some of the facets of mentoring relationships that, were they to use traditional methods, might be more difficult to obtain.

Two studies of mentoring were recently published on the newer forms of mentoring:

Study 1: Linnehan, F. (2001). The relation of a work-based mentoring program to the academic performance and behavior of African American students, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 59(3), 310-325.)

The authors provide a nice review of and rationale for the role of work-based mentoring. They note that work-based mentoring programs are likely to help young people make a smoother transition to adulthood in a number of ways, including:

- Working adults impart a sense of industry or competency to the students that bolsters students' self-esteem;
- With mentors' assistance, students have more opportunities to successfully complete various work tasks; this mastery, in turn, enhances the young person's self-perception; and
- Work-based mentoring enhances the relevance of school to work and thus creates a "salient context for learning," that encourages student interest in school and enhances their motivation to learn.

Study

Building on this review, the authors propose three questions:

- Do students who have mentors (formal or informal) have higher self-esteem, over time, than those who do not have mentors?
- Do students in formal mentoring programs believe more strongly in the relevance of school to work, over time, than those who do not participate in the program?
- Does participating in the program have a positive effect on grades and attendance?

These questions were tested through an examination of the work-based, adult-youth mentoring programs, established by the Philadelphia school district. The program required that students work at the mentors' employers one or two days a week during the school year. Students were paid for the work they did and received academic credit, but did not receive a grade.

School districts solicited employers to create the jobs and recruit the mentors. Mentors who volunteered attended a training program where they were shown how to complete an individual training plan to closely link student work experience to school. Participating students were classified into four groups.

Findings

Results indicated that participating in the program for more than half of the academic year was positively associated with students' grade point average and attendance rates. In particular:

- Working with a formal mentor in a program was related to improved student self-esteem and the feeling that school was more relevant to work; and
- Working with a natural mentor was related to student attitudes toward work, suggesting that "positive, supportive adult mentoring relationships that develop in or outside a program are an effective means of counteracting barriers."

Contrary to initial expectations, no differences were found in the beliefs and attitudes of students with formal versus informal mentors.

Reflections

Given the large attrition, the small sample and the reliance on self-report (as opposed to actual grades, etc), these results should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, it appears that facilitating the establishment of work-based mentoring relationships is an important strategy for school districts and organizations interested in students' school-to-work transitions

Understanding Newer Forms of Mentoring

Study 2: Dennison, S. (2000). A win-win peer mentoring and tutoring program: A collaborative model. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 20, 161-174.

Although peer mentoring has also gained popularity in recently years, very little is known about its effectiveness. Dennison provides a nice review of the research pertaining to peer mentoring programs, noting that they have been shown to benefit not only the mentee but also the mentor. Peer mentors enhance their own self-esteem and improve their academic performance as a result of their involvement in these programs. The authors describe the Big Buddies Program (a peer mentoring program operated through Big Brothers Big Sisters). The program has three major goals, to increase:

- Lower drop-out risk among a targeted group of elementary students;
- Increase volunteer interest among older teenagers; and
- Increase collaboration among local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies and a nearby university.

Study

Teachers of the targeted elementary school selected 25 third and fourth grade student as Little Buddies who were individually paired with 25 high school students. The mentors met with their Little Buddies on school grounds twice a week and provided assistance with academics and general support. The study examined pre- and post-test changes in mentees' self-esteem, school attitudes and classroom behavior. The 25 Big Buddies were evaluated on self-esteem and motivation to help others.

Results

Although the Little Buddies experienced some positive change, the researchers did not find any statistically significant differences between their pre- and post-test scores on the three scales. Similarly, the Big Buddies also experience some positive, though not statistically significant change in self-esteem and other directness.

During interviews, all of the high school students noted that their motivation to perform volunteer work, as a Big Brother or Big Sister, had greatly increased as a result of their participation in this program. Some were even reconsidering their career plans, considering working in a helping profession.

Reflection

In light of the small sample size and the inability to secure matched comparison groups, results should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, several conclusions can be drawn from this study. Programs like Big Buddies can:

- Encourage collaborations among high schools, elementary schools and community programs, resulting in greater sharing of resources and better use of funding;
- Lead to more high school students serving as peer mentors because they can get credit for volunteering; and
- Teach high school students about the values and morals of helping, effectively setting the stage for lifelong volunteerism and ensuring a more consistent supply of volunteer mentors.

Conclusion

Although this is only a sampling of the many interesting studies about mentoring that have been published in recent years, it demonstrates how much there is to be gained from occasionally combing the research literature. For example:

- Knowledge of recent findings that demonstrate the impact of similar programs lends credibility and support to programs;
- The literature reviews often provide a useful overview of the research and additional citations on a topic of interest; and
- Researchers are often happy to send reprints of their target and related articles on mentoring, and are eager to establish collaborations with practitioners.

Increasing the interchange between researchers and practitioners can only help to improve the relevance of research and the effectiveness of programs.