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How group experiences influence mentor–mentee relational development in a combined group and one-on-one mentoring program for early adolescent girls

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ABSTRACT

Group mentoring programs offer multiple routes for influencing development, through both one-on-one relationships and relational processes in the group context. Less explored is how the group context impacts one-on-one relationships. This study investigated how the group influences the development of the mentor–mentee relationship in a group and one-on-one mentoring program serving early adolescent girls. Qualitative analyses of interviews with mentees and mentors indicated: (a) regularly scheduled group meetings provided stability to dyads; (b) the integration of the group curriculum with the time set aside for one-on-one interactions fostered openness within dyads; (c) the group created a network that helped dyads be more attuned to their own relationships; and (d) peer group dynamics impacted dyads. We propose a process model on the way the group influences mentoring relationships across time by linking findings to theory and research. Theoretical implications for relational developmental systems theory and practical implications for programs are discussed.

Stemming from increased interest in mentoring as a developmental intervention, group mentoring programs have grown in popularity because they offer multiple routes for influencing adolescents, through both one-on-one and group level relationships (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014). Whereas models of change for one-on-one mentoring programs are common (e.g., Dubois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Rhodes, 2005), less is known about the mechanisms of change in group mentoring programs, where multiple youth are mentored in a group setting by one or more adults. Multiple models of group mentoring exist, including groups of varying mentor–mentee ratios and different sizes (Kuperminc, 2016). One format is a hybrid model that combines the group with one-on-one mentoring, having dyads attend the group together. In such programs relational processes in the group may influence the development, growth, and maintenance of the one-on-one mentoring relationship. This may be particularly true during early adolescence, when peers become more influential. Yet, the *processes* by which group mentoring facilitates or hinders mechanisms of one-on-one mentoring has been relatively unexplored. Mentoring is a promising intervention because programs can have a positive impact within some developmental domains (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011), however, it is critical to better understand the actual processes that contribute to strong mentoring relationships because research on mentoring as a whole has demonstrated varying effects on developmental outcomes (Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, & Bass, 2008). Exploring processes that influence a mentoring dyad may be critical to understanding program effectiveness or ineffectiveness.

To better understand the ways in which the relational context of a group influences one-on-one mentoring relationships during early adolescence, we interviewed participants in the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), a school-based, after-school mentoring program in which seventh-grade girls attend a group with their college-aged female mentors. The current study addressed the question: *How, if at all, does the group influence the development of the one-on-one mentor-mentee relationship in a combined group and one-on-one mentoring program?* Illuminating the processes by which the group context can influence one-on-one mentoring can inform program design and lend to developmental theory.

Literature review

Conceptual framework for the development of mentoring relationships

Keller (2004)'s Proposed Stages of Development of Youth Mentoring Relationships is a research-based theory that describes the factors that influence the evolution of one-on-one mentoring relationships. His descriptions of the "initiation" stage and the "growth and maintenance" stage are particularly important for understanding the development of strong one-on-one mentoring relationships characterized by mutuality, empathy, and trust (Rhodes, 2005). During the initiation stage the mentor and mentee get acquainted with each other by "learning about each other, assessing what the partner brings to the relationship, monitoring how their behavior affects the other, making comparisons against their expectations for the relationship, [and] determining similarity and compatibility" (Keller, 2004, p. 87). The initiation stage can take time, but processes in it can be powerful. For example, if the mentor and mentee perceive they are similar to one another early on in the relationship, the mentoring relationship may be stronger.

The growth and maintenance stage, which encompasses the majority of the mentoring relationship, is a period when mentors and mentees co-construct the norms that define their relationship, establishing expectations as to what can be discussed and what type of support will be offered. A mentoring relationship is strengthened during this stage if the pair engages in activities they perceive as fun. Moreover, during this stage a "growing sense of predictability, reliability, and familiarity may foster trust and encourage commitment to continuing the relationship" (Keller, 2004, p. 87). As a result of the growth of trust, self-disclosure often increases and conversations become more intimate. A relationship is maintained implicitly through these intimate, in-depth conversations and explicitly through "behaviors expressing the importance of the relationship" (p. 87).

In a group mentoring setting, however, mentoring relationships are evolving within the context of a group of other dyads. Therefore, interactions between a mentor and mentee are complicated by the potential influences of other individuals, dyads, and the group component itself. In addition, the culture of the group is itself influenced by the individuals and dyads present. For example, a previous study of YWLP (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger, & Lawrence, 2013) found that groups in which mentees reported greater satisfaction with their mentoring relationships at the end of the program engaged in more higher level positive social processes, such as trust building and care taking, throughout the program year than groups in which girls were less satisfied with their mentoring relationships. The groups wherein girls were less satisfied with their relationships tended to have higher levels of negative processes such as disengagement and rejection. The direction of the influence here is unknown (do group processes influence relational satisfaction or does relational satisfaction influence group processes) but is likely bi-directional, as will be discussed further in the following sections. Although Keller (2004) provides a lens for conceptualizing how mentoring relationships in programs unfold, the model is based on the relationship forming in a one-on-one mentoring program, limiting the applicability of the model to programs that couple one-on-one mentoring with group mentoring.

The lens of relational developmental systems theories

One potentially new way to think about group mentoring is through the lens of relational developmental systems theories (Overton, 2015). Relational developmental systems theory emphasizes dynamic individual ← → context relations as mutually influencing and as drivers of individual youth development (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015; Overton, 2015). Within group mentoring, there are multiple levels of influences and processes. We can consider not just the interactions between individuals and the group context, but also the interactions between the mentoring dyads and the group as mutually influencing the development of the dyad. The research on YWLP discussed previously (Deutsch et al., 2013) provides initial indication of the potential for bidirectional influences between the mentoring group and the mentoring dyads embedded within it. Individual experiences in one context may affect individual behaviors, and thereby the social processes and culture in the other context. Dynamic dyad ← → context relations, therefore, may be a unique and important influence for programs to consider.

Factors that may influence one-on-one mentoring

A growing body of literature has begun to explore how relationships beyond the mentor-mentee dyad may influence the one-on-one relationship. These studies have largely focused on the parents of mentees. Recent research has explored the impact of

parent/guardian involvement (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014), parenting style (Bowers et al., 2014), and program staff view of a parent's role (Basualdo-Delmonico & Spencer, 2016) on the mentor-mentee relationship. Even the mentor's perception of his/her relationship with a mentee's parent and program staff has been found to impact mentor satisfaction (Suffrin, Todd, & Sánchez, 2016). Keller and Blakeslee (2014) address this outside influence through the application of theories from the social networking literature explaining that mentoring relationships are "embedded within webs of other relationships" (p. 129) that have a reciprocal interaction on the relational development within a dyad. Although they focus specific attention on the role of parents/guardians, mentor coworkers, and program staff, they also propose that any person within the mentor and mentee network can have an influence on the relationship.

Although research is beginning to explore how families and other external sources influence mentoring relationships, there is limited research on how peer interactions influence mentoring relationships. Two studies, however, indicate that peers can play an important role in one-on-one mentoring. Pryce et al. (2015) found in their study of a mentoring program conducted in a school cafeteria that peers in the larger context of the cafeteria influenced the one-on-one mentoring relationship. Peers influenced the relationship in positive and negative ways, largely related to the way in which mentors perceived and engaged with the mentee's peers. In their study of "mentor families," in which three to four mentor-mentee dyads meet together for meals and activities, Weiler, Zimmerman, Haddock, and Krafchick (2014) found that both mentors and mentees identified a number of benefits of this format. For example, mentors appreciated gaining support and supervision through the groups; and both mentors and mentees felt the groups were a place where they experienced a sense of belonging and where mentees could grow and learn (Weiler et al., 2014).

A mentoring component that has a group aspect involving peers and other mentors may provide an opportunity for many indirect influences on the relational formation within a dyad. However, the dyads that comprise the group influence the group culture, and in many ways affect the way in which the group influences dyads. For example, the group dynamic can be supportive for the evolving one-on-one relationships, or can provide a distraction that limits the development of the one-on-one relationship.

Therefore, the interactions between the group and one-on-one relationships warrant further investigation.

In addition to relationships external to the dyad, individual characteristics of the mentor or mentee, such as race and gender, may influence one-on-one mentoring relationships. Generally, before entering into a mentoring relationship, mentees report preferring mentors who are of the same race (Sánchez, Colón-Torres, Feuer, Roundfield, & Berardi, 2014). This may be because same race matches enable youth to identify a certain level of shared understanding and mutuality, especially for ethnic minority youth (Albright, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017). Other benefits of same-race matches such as empowerment has been less explored (Albright et al., 2017). For ethnic minority adolescents, previous experiences with discrimination may lead to an initial mistrust in cross-race matches rather than same-race matches (Sánchez et al., 2014). Given that ethnic minority mentees are often mentored by White mentors, a group context where mentees come together may establish a safe space for mentees to develop relationships.

However, research finds that race is not critically important to youth outcomes in cross-race matches when a dyad has similar interests, when mentors are culturally competent, and when mentors seek to build rapport with mentees (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Park, Yoon, & Crosby, 2016; Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, 2002; Sánchez et al., 2014). This suggests that a program that fosters positive relationship processes and cultural competence can support cross-race matches. In formal mentoring programs most matches tend to be same-gender matches. Thus, less research has compared cross-gender versus same-gender matches. However, girls tend to develop more intimate relationships through sharing personal information, feeling close to a mentor, and experiencing greater empathy (Liang, Bogat, & Duffy, 2014). A group context may be able to support the type of relationships girls value and the relational processes that can support cross-race (and same-race) mentoring relationships.

Relational processes in the YWLP group

The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) is a combined group and one-on-one mentoring program that has been implemented in a number of communities in the United States and internationally. In YWLP, the group serves as a means to deliver developmentally focused curriculum to seventh-grade

female mentees, as well as a setting in which processes can occur that themselves influence both mentors and mentees. Prior research on YWLP suggests that there are dynamic individual ← → context relations at work in the program in terms of individual youth outcomes, mentoring relationship quality, and group processes. First, the group and the mentoring relationship appear to influence girls' outcomes in different ways. Relational skills and development (e.g., trust, respecting others, making or becoming closer to friends) was the program outcome most frequently reported by mentees, the majority of whom attributed changes in that domain to their YWLP group, as opposed to their one-on-one mentoring relationship (Deutsch, Reitz-Krueger, Henneberger, Futch Ehrlich, & Lawrence, 2017). Changes in self-regulation and self-understanding were also reported by most of the mentees (71–87%, respectively). Changes in self-regulation were about equally attributed to the one-on-one relationship with the mentors and the program curriculum, whereas changes in self-understanding were about equally attributed to the mentoring relationship and the mentoring group. Social processes in the group also appear to be related to the quality of the one-on-one relationships (Deutsch et al., 2013), as previously discussed. In addition, mentees encourage one another, give advice, and reinforce group norms (Deutsch, Reitz-Krueger, Molloy, & Varga, 2013), and the mentors support one another (Marshall, Lawrence, & Peugh, 2013). Although the group plays an important role in the program formally and informally, little research has been done to explore the ways in which the group influences the development of the one-on-one mentoring relationships. Given that the mentees were most likely to point to the mentoring group as the program factor influencing their relational development in general, there is reason to believe that the group may also play a role in the development of their one-on-one mentoring relationships.

Current study

A review of group mentoring by the National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC) suggests that in designing programs, organizations should reflect on the function a group plays. In particular, the review posits that hybrid programs should ask "how and when do the group activities supplement or enhance the direct one-to-one mentoring?" (Kuperminc, 2016, p. 15). The current study is guided by this suggestion from the NMRC as well as by three main areas of research and theory: (a) stages of relational development in mentoring; (b)

relational developmental systems theory; and (c) factors that influence mentoring dyads. It also builds on the previous studies of YWLP, the findings from which point to the dynamic nature of influences in the program and hint at the ways in which the group may enhance particular outcomes, particularly in the realm of relational development. The aim of the current study is to investigate how, if at all, the group influences the development of the one-on-one mentor-mentee relationship in YWLP. We conducted qualitative interviews with early adolescent mentees and their college-aged mentors to explore both members of the dyad's perceptions of the group in relation to their one-on-one experiences. Although we believe that the individual dyad ← → group context interactions are what drives the development of the one-to-one relationship, the current study primarily focuses on the individual dyad ← group context relations.

Method

Data for the current study comes from a larger, mixed methods study of YWLP. All procedures were approved by the Principal Investigator's University's Institutional Review Board.

Program structure

YWLP is a year-long, school-based combined group and one-on-one mentoring program that pairs college-aged women mentors with seventh grade girls (Lawrence, Sovik-Johnston, Roberts, & Thorndike, 2011). Mentors are referred to as "Big Sisters" and mentees are referred to as "Little Sisters." Mentors are recruited from a local university and take a year long course focused on issues facing adolescent girls and best practices in mentoring. As part of the course, they meet once a week for an hour with the other mentors in their group and their group facilitator (their "Big Sister Group") to plan the group activities and discuss any issues the group is facing. A school counselor identifies mentees who are at-risk for poor academic, social, and/or emotional outcomes but also have leadership potential. Generally, one Big Sister is paired with one Little Sister, however, occasionally one Big may be paired with two Littles. YWLP has three structural components: group activities, one-on-one activities, and structured support for mentors.

Group activities

Each YWLP group consists of 8–10 mentor–mentee pairs and one facilitator. The group meets weekly for

two hours after-school across the school year at the middle-school the mentees attend. The group follows a formal curriculum of interactive, structured activities and discussions focused on issues facing adolescent girls. Topics covered include academic achievement, healthy decision-making, celebrating one's body, social aggression, gossiping, positive self-image, and other topics salient to the period of early adolescence. Each group begins with highs and lows, wherein mentors and mentees share highlights and challenges from their week. Activities that follow range from discussion based to activity based and vary in terms of whether they focus on relationship building or skill building. Skill building activities often incorporate role plays or use of other artifacts, such as videos or magazines, to discuss a topic and introduce specific skills. For example, to introduce a unit on bullying, clips from the movie *Mean Girls* are shown and the group then discusses how the film applies to their own lives. This is then followed by the introduction of skills that could be used to intervene in bullying and role playing to practice these skills.

A facilitator serves as the overall coordinator of the group, delivering the curriculum and keeping activities on track. The facilitator in each group is a graduate student or advanced undergraduate student with previous experience as a mentor in the YWLP. As such, the facilitator is typically the same age or a few years older than the mentors, with more experience in the group setting. The facilitator is sometimes also a mentor who has their own mentee in the group. Although the facilitator tends to serve as the group leader, the program encourages a distributed leadership model, and facilitators have different mentors take the lead in different group activities. Twice each semester the group does activities together on the college campus. Occasionally, the group will also have outings or service activities such as apple picking and food drives.

One-on-one activities

Time is also designated during group for pairs to meet separately during what is called "sister time." Sister time immediately follows an "energizer" and initial group check-in. Pairs are also expected to spend one-on-one time outside of group together for at least four hours each month which the pair schedules independently with each other. Outside of the designated group time a mentoring dyad decides on their own when they want to meet and the types of activities they would like to do.

Structured support for mentors

Mentors are supported in a number of ways. During the first half of the mentoring relationship, mentors have a semester-long course that covers theory and research on issues facing adolescent girls and connections to the YWLP curriculum. Across the year, mentors simultaneously meet in a separate Big Sisters group with a facilitator. Finally, mentors complete weekly attendance surveys that include a section that allows one to voice any questions or concerns to the YWLP coordinators.

Sample

Semi-structured post-program interviews were conducted separately with mentees and mentors during the 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 school years. All 148 mentees and 142 mentors were invited to participate and 113 mentees and 130 mentors completed interviews. There were no significant differences between the interview sub-sample and the full program sample on demographic variables (Varga & Deutsch, 2016). Participants came from 16 different mentoring groups (eight in each program year) across four middle schools.

Our sample consisted of interviewees that discussed both the mentoring group and the one-on-one relationship. Four mentees were excluded from data analyses because the mentees described their perception of the group without elaborating on its relationship to the one-on-one relationship or the interviewer did not ask the question. During interviews, some mentors misinterpreted the question about their experiences in the group as asking about their Big Sister group rather than the mentoring group. These data were irrelevant to the current study. Thus, we excluded transcripts from analysis wherein the data coded as group experience referred to the mentors' experiences in their Big Sisters groups, yielding a total sample size for this study of 197 participants ($n = 109$ mentees; $n = 88$ mentors). Of the mentees included in the sample, 44% identified as Black, 15.6% as White, 5.5% as Native American, 4.6% as Hispanic, .9% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 11.0% as Mixed, and 11.9% as "other." Of the mentors included, 57.5% identified as White, 22.5% identified as African American, 7.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 7.5% as Hispanic, and 5% as "other." Similar to many other mentoring programs, dyads in the sample were largely matched across race where possible. However due to the larger number of racially minoritized youth than mentors, White mentors were frequently paired with ethnic minority mentees.

Table 1. Group level factors that influenced the one-on-one relationship identified in Phases 1 and 2 of data analyses.

Characteristic	Definition
Curriculum	The program curriculum within the group influences the 1:1 relationship. Program curriculum are the topics and activities formally done within the group context.
Informal Interactions in Group	Informal interactions that one or more parts of the dyad had with other members of the group infleunces the 1:1 relationship.
Reactions to Group	The reaction one part of the dyad has in relationship to the idea of the group as a whole influences the 1:1 relationship. These are not problems with specific people in the group. It is more saying they like or do not like the group, do not like coming to the group, or do not come to the group.
Comparisons in Group	One member of the dyad compares their mentor or mentee to another pair which influences the perception of the 1:1 relationship or how they approach the relationship.
Sister Time	Having sister time is mentioned as influencing the 1:1 relationship. Sister time is the specific and structured time during group meetings when the mentor-mentee pairs go off on their own.
Time	Group allows dyad more time to see one another or allows for time to meet they otherwise would not have gotten to.
Observations in Group	Group allows mentor/mentee to see little/big in a "new light" by watching how they interact with other members of the group.
Support From Other Group Members	Group provides support to the mentor for building or maintaining a relationship with the mentee.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted in the spring immediately following the participants' completion of the program and focused on the mentees' and mentors' experiences in the program. Participants were asked about the ways they had changed over the course of the year, experiences in YWLP, their mentor-mentee relationship, whether the group influenced their relationship, and how their relationship would be different without the group. Interviews took, on average, 30 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and transcripts were uploaded to a qualitative software analysis program. Data in the larger study were originally coded in NVivo with first cycle descriptive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) based on the topics of interest to the overarching study (e.g., group, one-one-one, mentee change). The coding process included training of multiple researchers to reliability of 70% or greater on coding followed by independent coding of transcripts. Data was later exported to Dedoose, another qualitative analysis platform, which was used for the analysis for this study.

Data analysis

The purpose of data analysis was to explore the range of mechanisms by which the group influenced mentoring relationships from the perspective of program participants. For this study we focused on interview data coded as both "mentoring group" and "one-on-one" to analyze. A research team made up of the three coauthors engaged in an iterative process of data analysis. We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), constant comparison, and memoing across four phases of analyses.

During Phases 1 and 2 of the analyses, we generated the characteristics of the group that influenced the one-on-one relationship and described mechanisms underlying each category. First, provisional codes were developed on how the group influenced the one-on-one relationship. One team-member conducted line-by-line open coding of a small group of data to identify influential processes which were then refined to develop focused codes. This coder then put together a codebook with which a second team member was trained. The two coders independently coded a select amount of data to come to a consensus on data coded and make necessary revisions to the codebook.

Through an iterative process of coding, analytic memoing, and team meetings, the research team identified group level factors that influenced the one-on-one mentoring relationship from the perspectives of the interviewees (See Table 1). Each factor outlined a way in which the group influenced the one-on-one mentoring relationship in terms of facilitating or hindering the development, maintenance, or some aspect of the dyad's perception of the relationship. Examples of these factors include the group curriculum and mentor/mentee's observations of each other in the group. We then engaged in constant comparison of data excerpts coded *within* factors to describe the mechanisms by which each factor influenced the one-on-one relationship. For example, through constant comparison of data under the category of group observations, we found that one of the underlying mechanisms was that observing each other in the

group allowed the individual to learn more about their mentor or mentee.

During Phases 3 and 4, we identified connections *across* factors to identify themes and generate a process model of how the group influenced the development of the one-on-one relationship. First, we identified the ways that underlying mechanisms of one factor related to underlying mechanisms of another factor. From this process, we identified four major themes in the way that the group influenced the dyadic mentoring relationship. During analysis, we noted that across factors, there were interviewees who suggested the group served a different function at different points in the mentoring relationship, leading us to seek out extant literature on relationship development. We consulted Keller (2004)'s stages of the development of a mentoring relationship to use as a theoretical lens to analyze our data.

Because we noted that our data aligned with Keller (2004)'s initiation and growth and maintenance stages, we decided to more systematically assess how our data connected to Keller's model. We wrote multiple analytic memos on how our data related to the two stages and held several discussions on the way in which our data mirrored Keller's model, and differences we saw as well. We then generated a conceptual model for how a group could support the development of the one-on-one mentoring relationship over time. Our goal was to generate a theory for the process in the most ideal situation, rather than testing a theory for all relationships.

Findings

Most interviewees reported that the group influenced the one-on-one relationship. Overall, there were a total of 134 data excerpts, from 99 participants, that were coded for the group influencing the one-on-one relationship. Although the majority of these interviewees described the group facilitating the development of the one-on-one mentoring relationship, 30 participants mentioned the group negatively influencing the relationship (i.e., hindering the development of the relationship). These excerpts represented 28% of coded excerpts; however, not all of those excerpts were solely negative; some included both positive and negative influences. Mentors reported the group had negative influences on the relationship more than mentees. Given that mentors may feel responsible for building a relationship, it makes sense that mentors may have been more sensitive to negative influences of the group. In addition, because early adolescence is

a time of increased salience of peers, the mentees may be more attuned than the mentors to the group as a positive aspect of the program. Within dyads, mentors and mentees rarely agreed on whether there was a negative influence of the group on the pair, suggesting having both the mentor and mentee perspectives is critical.

We identified four themes around how the group influenced the dyadic mentoring relationships: (a) regularly scheduled group meetings provided stability to dyads; (b) the integration of the group curriculum with sister time fostered openness within dyads; (c) the group created a network that helped dyads be more attuned to their own relationships; and (d) peer group dynamics impacted dyads. Each theme, including examples of negative cases, is described in the following sections.

How the group influenced the dyadic mentoring relationships

Regularly scheduled group meetings provided stability to dyads

The group provided a consistent time and place for dyads to see each other, which established the type of stability important in the development of dyadic mentoring relationships. Even though dyads were expected to spend time together outside of group, having a consistent time for meeting was important in supporting the mentor when schedules grew busy and when challenges arose that prevented meeting outside of the group context. The importance of a consistent time for meeting was especially salient for mentors. As one mentor pointed out:

> I think it's [the group's impact on her relationship with her mentee] definitely good because even when I can't meet up with her it gives me a solid two hours that I definitely see her every week. And I think that is really important. So it definitely gave me, you know, even though every week we can't meet up and I try to make time and we try to meet up. As much as I'm working around my schedule, I'm working around her schedule. At least this is something she can count on every Wednesday from 4:15 to 6:15. I'll be in that school if she wants to come. And she comes every single time.

For this mentor the group provided a safety net during busy weeks. For some dyads, regularly attending group was one of the *only* things that provided stability to their relationship because they rarely saw each other outside of group. The impact of barriers that may arise in one-on-one mentoring appeared to be reduced by attending group regularly. As one mentor

said: "that structure is good because it's constantly reinforcing that relationship even if you don't have outside time."

The consistency of a regular group meeting also created momentum in the relationship. One mentee speculated that she would have had a less open relationship with her mentor if it was just a one-on-one mentoring program because of the continuity that was there through regularly attending group: "Like if the group wasn't there, like, I wouldn't see her every Thursday, and stuff, and like, I'd probably maybe forget about her, but then like [pause] yeah. Like, I just wouldn't really remember." When asked how her experience would be different if there was no group, one mentor described the group reinforcing her motivation to see her Little Sister stating:

> I'm not sure I would have stuck with it [the program]. I think one on one would have been really hard because it then becomes really challenging to find time to spend together. Then when you don't see each other for a couple [of] weeks you kind of lack the desire to like break your routine to make sure you hang out with them. I think the group helps keep you interested and motivated and wanting to be there for your Little.

Regularly attending group fostered a degree of investment in and excitement for the relationship.

Yet, the stability the group created could in certain cases have a negative impact. In dyads where one member did not show up or appeared disinterested in the group, the other member of the dyad often reported negative feelings about their mentor/mentee or the relationship. For example, one mentor reported:

> She skipped a lot of groups. And it was like that too was discouraging because it was like, "Oh you don't even want to see me," you know. And like you try not to take it to heart because you know they're middle school girls and you don't really matter. But, yeah.

This behavior and the hurt that followed was primarily reported by mentors. However, in an interview with a former mentee she described how hurtful it was when her mentor engaged in this behavior. The mentee explained:

> The thing I didn't like is when my Big Sister did not attend the group. Yeah, because every time she broke her arm, she broke her leg, she pulled a muscle in her back, and then like usually the next day that I saw her, her leg and arm and back was okay so you know your arm and your leg cannot heal that fast unless you are immortal or something.

This interviewee dropped out of YWLP because her Big Sister would miss group and rarely took her on outings. When asked why she did not give her Big Sister another chance when her Big Sister reached out to her after she dropped out of YWLP, the mentee referenced how her Big Sister did not regularly attend group, stating: "I gave her so many chances, she wasn't at group for like ten times and that is a lot compared to how many weeks we had, yeah. I gave her ten chances, well actually nine." Overall, not showing up to group often signaled to a member of the dyad that their partner was not invested in the relationship.

Interviewees often described the consistency of meetings as critical to the maintenance of the dyadic mentoring relationship. However, some interviewees speculated that they would have spent more free one-on-one time together if there was no group commitment and this additional time together could bring them closer. Thus, we speculate the stability provided by consistent meetings may be especially important for the most vulnerable mentoring relationships. In other words, the relationships that may be more likely to end in just one-on-one programs because one part of the dyad did not maintain contact with the other (Spencer, 2007; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, Walsh, & Drew, 2017) may have been more able to be salvaged when both parties attended the group regularly.

Integration of the group curriculum with sister time fostered openness within dyads

As described in the Methods section, YWLP groups included both structured activities and discussions focused on issues facing adolescent girls and "sister time," in which dyads met one-on-one. Over the course of the program year the combination of these two design components influenced the one-on-one mentoring relationship by providing a foundation for the dyad to first get acquainted and then shaping the one-on-one conversations. As time progressed dyads utilized the group curriculum and space allotted for sister time to open up and deepen their conversations.

Group activities and discussions enabled the pair to get to know each other directly in group as well as indirectly by setting the foundation for dyads to later open up. Mentees reported learning more about their mentors through group because: "like some of the questions we had during group … it's stuff that probably wouldn't have never been brought up if it wasn't for group," "in group we talk about a lot of stuff, so we can learn a lot about each other," "with the group you're telling everyone how you feel and telling your

opinion in the group discussions," and "we got to, like, do stuff together, and, like, try to trust each other and stuff." One mentor hypothesized how the relational group context fostered connection, stating:

> you're not as likely to speak up when it's just one on one because you're thinking, "Well, the person's going to judge me" whereas if it's a group there's, "Oh that person feels the same way as I do" and there's like a connection made through that.

Another mentor "really liked the group meetings the best," because it allowed her to be more aware of the unique experiences of her mentee stating:

> That's where I've learned and grew the most, just from listening to her and listening to her experiences and then comparing them with mine when I was younger and just seeing that, yeah, this girl does need a lot of help and she needs my guidance.

Thus, observing a partner's contribution in the group revealed things about one's partner. Occasionally, participants described how learning about each other directly or indirectly through the group curriculum helped them realize they actually did not like their mentee/mentor. However, most frequently it revealed the similarities they had with one another. In turn, it often created a foundation for the relationship. Keller (2004) asserts that getting to know each other during the initiation stage can take a significant amount of time in mentoring relationship development. However, our data suggests that the YWLP group curriculum may have established the foundation for the relationship earlier than may have occurred in just a one-on-one mentoring program. This foundation was reported by mentors and mentees as helping them feel more comfortable opening up to each other.

The group structure and curriculum set norms for dyads that sparked and deepened conversations. First, it showed mentees it was socially appropriate to divulge personal information to their mentors which, in turn, facilitated more open conversations. It appeared that early on in the program, the group modeled for more reticent mentees that it was okay to interact with their mentor, who was a new and unfamiliar adult in their life. For example, one mentor speculated that the group influenced the nature of interactions in their relationship because: "just having that visual of everyone talking to their big sister kind of makes her wanna talk to me more." Thus, it appears that dyads who were comfortable sharing personal information helped to create a group norm around sharing that positively influenced other dyads,

especially those where the initiation stage was developing more slowly.

The group structure and curriculum also provided mentors with ways to guide conversations with their mentees. Early on in the program, it gave mentors who were unsure what to ask a way to initiate conversations; one mentor recalled: "I would just say like, 'What did you think about this that happened in group?' It was a good way to have conversation with them if you couldn't think of anything else." Both mentors and mentees reported that as time progressed the curriculum raised sensitive topics, such as family dynamics, dating, and sex. In raising these topics, the curriculum established norms in which the group culture was to talk about sensitive topics which one mentor described as the "group effect":

> I think like as soon as one person shared it there was just kind of a group effect, like the next person would share something similar. I felt like that dynamic definitely helped her because she would chime in, like "Oh, I had that experience too."

Discussing sensitive topics in group could enhance interactions in the dyadic mentoring relationship; as one mentor noted, "a lot of those topics helped open up doors for us." It thus could give mentors the confidence to bring up difficult subjects and could make mentees more comfortable sharing personal information. As one mentee said:

> I would say it [her relationship with her mentor] was enhanced with the group … because the group like opened up so many conversations that we probably wouldn't have gotten to, and I think that is like the reason for that … Like, I probably would have told her who I liked and stuff, but I don't think I would have talked to her about my dad and stuff like that, 'cause I mean like that's personal information about me, and I am very hard to start trusting certain people … I think to get trust you have to gain it first, instead of like you automatically have it.

Interestingly, the aforementioned mentee specifically notes that she does not trust people easily, and the group appeared to foster trust that transferred to her one-on-one relationship.

After discussing a sensitive topic in group, it could then be discussed further within the dyad. Follow-up to issues raised in the whole group setting appeared to be especially important for mentees who were less comfortable participating authentically in the large group with the 8–10 mentoring pairs. These youth were more open during the sister time portion of the group. Mentors and mentees reported that sister time was more open because it "is more personal and that's when I really get to talk to her," "that's like when me

and Big Sister talked alone without like no friends," and "we can focus on each other instead of focusing on like everybody." At times participants reported that sister time was more open because of the personality of the mentee, with shyer youth being less likely to open up during group.

Thus, it appeared that the group curriculum and one-on-one time were important pieces that worked together, pieces that some interviewees had a hard time discussing as separate components. This highlights the mutually influencing dyad ← → context relations (Overton, 2015) and the ways in which these two components of YWLP interacted to influence participant experiences and relational development. Importantly, the YWLP group curriculum combined with sister time within the group appeared to scaffold intimacy in the relationship without the perception that the mentor was pressuring the youth to have difficult conversations. As one mentor said, "it really lightens the load and the conversation flows a lot easier in the beginning if you have a group and then slowly work your way to a one-on-one, a true one-on-one." Given the reciprocal nature of this dyad-context relationship, it is also possible that these conversations within dyads during sister time may have influenced the nature of the group context as the program year unfolded, although this is not the focus of this particular study.

Although the group curriculum was valuable as a catalyst for opening up, when the curriculum was delivered too rigidly, some participants described it as stifling interactions in the relationship. This suggests there needs to be an appropriate balance of a curriculum with flexibility. Having an appropriate allotment of time in the whole group versus sister time may be central to how well the group curriculum facilitates openness in the one-on-one mentoring relationship. This time allotment may vary based on the developmental stage of the one-on-one mentoring relationship. One mentor reflected that as the year went on a curriculum that was too rigid could be frustrating to pairs in her group:

> I think that at a certain point maybe when like second semester starts and we're sort of flying without the class so to speak, I think enough of a relationship has been formed where it seems like … a lot of the structure of the class seems to get in the way of like actually having a relationship with the girls … Maybe if like every other week was like a play week or something.

We speculate that it may be appropriate for this time allotment to change as the one-on-one relationship develops.

Group created a network that can help dyads be more attuned to their own relationships

Having a collection of individuals in a group can enable mentors and mentees to be more attuned to each other as well as to dynamics within their own relationship. Pryce (2012) identified mentors' abilities to be attuned to their mentees' needs as an important process in the development of quality mentoring relationships. In YWLP, the group appears to have facilitated attunement at three levels. First, mentors gained insights regarding the needs of their mentees by observing interactions with peers. Second, dyads assessed their own relationship based on other relationships in the group. And, third, mentors could address issues in their relationship by tapping into the expertise of others who observed the relationship in real time.

Mentors could better understand one's mentee through the lens of her dynamics with peers or connections to friends. This, in turn, provided a better context for understanding the mentee's behavior and may have allowed the mentor to provide her with contextually based support. Mentors reported that observing their mentees amongst their peers in group allowed them to: "see her more in her atmosphere;" gain "some insight on why her day might be bad;" and "know what she was like when she was hanging out with her peers." Such observations and interactions could then enable mentors to become more attuned to the needs of their mentee.

Mentors and mentees also reported being more attuned to their own relationship because they were able to observe other relationships, using what one mentor called a "comparative context" to assess and judge their own relationship. She explained the process as establishing "this spectrum of what you were shooting for or like you could feel okay about." This comparative context to assess one's own relationship could be affirming for some and discouraging for others. Mentees generally compared their relationship based on the activities that other pairs engaged in compared to their own relationship stating things like: "I wanted to go to roller-skating and to the movies– like [this mentee and mentor]" and "They did a lot together. And [this mentee] was telling me that, um, she got messages after messages from her big sister and I don't." After the interviewer asked one participant to tell her about her relationship with her mentor, the mentee expressed how this impacted her feelings:

> I don't really know how to explain it but I have some fun with her sometimes and it, it's kind of weird

because like all the other big sisters and little sisters go out and do stuff. But – like they do a lot of stuff—but when I'm with [Big Sister] we only did like a few things together. And I kind of felt left out. And I knew she was always busy with something. And I kind of felt left out because all the other big sisters and little sisters went everywhere.

Although this mentee was aware there was a reason that she spent less time with her mentor, it still made her feel "left out" because she had other pairs to which she compared her relationship, something that is less likely to occur in a one-on-one mentoring program. Mentors were actually more likely than mentees to compare their mentoring relationship to other dyads. Whereas mentees compared their relationships based on the types of activities other pairs did, mentors often compared relationships based on what they perceived as other pairs' level of closeness.

A few mentors described using this comparative context to bolster their own relationship, rather than to judge their own success. They described observing others to learn new practices and skills to employ in their own relationships. For example, one mentor explained:

> I've seen stuff happen between other big sister pairs, and I'm like, oh that's happened with them, look how she has handled it. And I'll just apply that to my situation with Little Sister and it would help me a lot to see someone else have a certain issue.

Another mentor described feeling motivated by observing peers interact with their mentees over the course of her relationship with her "quiet and withdrawn" mentee because it gave her ideas of how to deepen her relationship. She stated these comparisons, "helped me to kind of jump into action and get a little more proactive with some of the things that would bring us closer." Although it was less common for mentors to use the comparative context to transform their own relationship, it is notable that some used this as a tool to not only be attuned to their own relationship but also to address weaknesses in their relationship.

Finally, mentors were able to be attuned to their own relationship because they had multiple perspectives to utilize as support, especially when issues arose with their mentee. The facilitator, in particular, may have been helpful because they already had experience serving as a mentor in the program. One mentor discussed the way in which the facilitator and the other Bigs jumped in when the relationship hit a difficult period:

> Me and my little didn't necessary have that hey let's hang out kind of bond. It started that way and then it

drastically fell and it was more of a struggle in the middle of it. It caused me to get really frustrated and that led me to turn to like my facilitator and the other bigs and we kind of like adapted different methods with [Little Sister] to get her more comfortable … When she interacted with other people it was fine; just me and her. So we tried different ways to get her to open up and to get her to feel comfortable and after that happened it got better.

In a traditional one-on-one mentoring relationship, it is possible that this match would have struggled to overcome these obstacles. Depending on the role of the program staff, it could have been difficult to detect the issue and provide enough targeted resources to assist the match in working through the difficult time. However, the fact that this match was nested in a group provided additional resources within the dyad's ecology, such as Bigs and a facilitator, who were present to provide support and had an idea of the issue based on their own observations of the pair. Keller and Blakeslee (2014) note that external relationships can either deter or support mentoring relationships. The added group component to the one-on-one mentoring relationship provides an opportunity to scaffold some of those influences, ensuring they remain positive.

Although there were some examples where group comparisons led to poor feelings among the mentor and mentee, the opportunity also provided support in many cases, especially for the mentor. Mentors reported gaining ideas for new approaches to try when they were struggling to connect with their mentee. Having other Bigs and a facilitator around provided additional perspectives when relationships ran into obstacles, providing tailored support for the mentor, mentee, and the dyad as a whole.

Peer group dynamics impacted dyads

When everyone was at group, the collection of individuals totaled anywhere from 17 to 21 people. Over the course of the school-year, there were times when the group dynamics would derail the focus on the curriculum. Friends and cliques, a desire to be liked by peers, people who did not get along, general peer dynamics, and the overall energy in the group could distract the group which, in turn, influenced the mentoring pairs. However, participants also described how some of these dynamics could also be used to facilitate the development of the dyadic mentoring relationships.

In YWLP groups, mentees and mentors were embedded within both their dyads and their peer groups. Both the middle school girls and the college

women could sometimes get drawn into peer dynamics in ways that distracted from the development of the one-on-one relationships. For example, mentors reported: "At group [the middle school girls] just want to like be in their little cliques and like laugh and joke. And they don't really include us [Big Sisters] in that;" "She would always like go and giggle to her friends and then laugh about it and I don't know if she's laughing about me;" and "There was a dynamic of some of the big sisters just didn't even really try hard to pay attention to their little sisters the whole time." At times this may have been an extension of school dynamics at both the middle school and college levels. However, as the school year progressed, the group developed its own friendship networks. Thus, although friendship networks with other mentors could allow mentors to be more attuned to the needs of their mentees, as previously discussed, they also could take away from the one-on-one relationships.

Some mentees engaged in particularly disruptive behaviors that caused the group to be distracted. Mentors of those who behaved in ways that would derail the group would then develop negative perceptions of their mentees that likely influenced their relationship. For example, one mentor lamented, "The minute we were in group she had to be around everybody else and being really annoying and jumping on everybody else so like when it was group time it wasn't about me and her." Another mentor believed that she had a good relationship with her mentee but described her mentee in a negative way when she was asked by the interviewer about the group. The following is an excerpt of how she described her mentee's behavior:

> I'm just looking at her like sit down and shut up. Outside of group we're fine, really we're okay … [In group] I just usually try to ignore her because she gives me a headache because everybody's looking at me like control your little sister and I can't control her … So I guess I feel stressed out like Little Sister just behave please because you're like reflecting me.

Although behavioral issues were not always about the group, mentors often attributed their mentee's misbehavior to trying to impress other group members and friendships that had formed.

However, there were also times that group distractions *facilitated* interactions between the mentor and mentee that strengthened the relationship. Some mentees interviewed described feeling forced to engage with peers that they did not get along with, and mentors discussed assisting their mentees with conflicts with peers as they happened. Some dyads became closer when the mentor helped the mentee process negative interactions with or feelings about others from group. For example, one mentee explained how her mentor's support was helpful, saying:

> My big sister helped me get like – there was the person in group who I really did not get along with. But she helped me get over that. And like whenever I had a problem she, I could talk to her … I think it helped because there are people in my group that I didn't know and that I'm now friends with.

When dyads discussed topics such as not liking a peer, being bullied by a group member, or not liking the facilitator, the mentor could provide real-time support to the mentee based on interactions seen during the group meetings. In this case, members of the dyad used these distractions to form a closer relationship. The mentee took a chance at confiding in the mentor and the mentor then responded in a way that showed empathy. This mirrors the process identified by Hirsch (2005) in after-school programs, in which staff are able to draw on "real time" experiences with peer groups to provide in-the-moment support and feedback to youth. It is also likely that the support that occurred in the dyad transformed how mentees interacted with others in the group which, in turn, could have influenced the culture of the group context.

The atmosphere of the group also influenced dyads. Some youth, for example, would be more closed off in the group setting, whereas others—as was seen previously—showed more of themselves in the group setting. The group atmosphere could be distracting for both the mentee and the mentor. For example, one mentor reported:

> I kept paying attention to what was around me and I couldn't really focus on her and I think she was just very uncomfortable. Because she's so, I think most girls at that age are so socially aware of everyone else and she was so worried about acting a certain way to make everyone think that she had a certain image.

However, the dyads also connected through the group atmosphere by "like joking or whatever in group," giving each other knowing looks regarding the atmosphere of the group, and experiencing the fun of group together.

Thus, the dynamics of the group both facilitated and hindered the development of the one-on-one relationships. Keller and Blakeslee (2014) explain that external relationships can impact the formation of a one-on-one mentoring relationship; these can be positive or negative influences. Some of the potential hindrances, such as peer dynamics, could be ameliorated

by structuring the program in a way to prevent negative impacts, especially if program staff know that this is a potential area for challenges to arise. Since dyads develop within the context of the group, the group could be organized in a way that prevents mentors and peers from engaging in side conversations at the expense of the dyad development, such as training facilitators to manage the group or building in opportunities for peer engagement within the curriculum.

Discussion

Our study provides a complex picture of how a group mentoring context can affect mentoring dyads. We found four overarching ways in which the group influenced the development of the one-on-one mentoring relationships: (a) regularly scheduled group meetings provided stability to dyads; (b) the integration of the group curriculum with sister time fostered openness within dyads; (c) the group created a network that helped dyads be more attuned to their own relationships; and (d) peer group dynamics impacted dyads. Notably, these factors nearly all had both positive and negative aspects, suggesting the group can both facilitate and hinder the development of strong mentoring relationships. Thus, this study captures the complexity that is inherent in programs. Based on our final analysis of the data in light of extant literature we propose a process model of the ideal function of the group across the course of the development of the one-on-one mentoring relationship within the YWLP. After describing the model, we discuss implications our study has for theory and practice.

Proposed process model: How group experiences can bolster the development of a one-on-one mentoring relationship

We generated a process model of the ways in which experiences in the group can influence the mentoring relationship over time for two reasons. First, across the data we noted some interviewees indicated that the importance, focus, and emphasis given to the group varied based on the point in time of the relationship. This suggested that it was important to approach the data in a way in which we could conceptualize the function of the group across time. Second, we noted that a small number of mentors reported intentionally leveraging the group to bolster their mentoring relationship with their mentees, rather than simply reflecting on the ways that the group context haphazardly influenced the one-on-one mentoring

relationship. Thus, we sought to conceptualize the potential of the group when used intentionally to support relationship development.

From a relational developmental systems framework (Overton, 2015), the three levels present in YWLP (the individuals, the dyads, and the group) are each interacting with and influencing each other, with the group mutually influencing both individual youth development (Lerner et al., 2015) and the development of the dyadic relationships, the latter of which is the focus in our model. Our focus on the dyadic relationships was also informed by Keller (2004)'s Proposed Stages of Youth Mentoring Relationships. Although this framework describes how mentoring relationships in formal one-on-one mentoring programs develop, we were able to connect this framework to our findings in a way that took into account the group, the mentoring dyad relationship, and reciprocal interactions between the two over time. We found it conceptually useful to separate Keller (2004)'s "growth and maintenance stage" into two stages. Therefore, our model has three stages: initiation, growth, and maintenance.

Although the group had both positive and negative influences on the one-on-one mentoring relationship, in this section we propose the "ideal" process model (see Figure 1). This process model is exploratory and has not been empirically tested. The model highlights the positive ways that the group can influence the one-on-one relationship. It also highlights the importance of facilitators being attuned to the potential negative influences of the group on the one-on-one mentoring relationship and responding accordingly across all phases. These potential negative influences include peer distractions, people feeling uncomfortable speaking in front of the group, and mentors comparing their relationships negatively to other dyads.

Initiation stage of the relationship: Feeling less awkward

The start of any new relationship can be awkward, especially when one is being "set up" with a stranger. Indeed, both mentors and mentees frequently used the word "awkward" to describe the initiation of their relationship. During this stage, the group helped mitigate that awkwardness, providing a sense of comfort and safety in numbers. One mentor reported the function of the group was important because, "it's not just standing around with me and her trying to get to know each other. Not like a blind date." One mentee said that not having the group early on, "yeah, that would be really scary." Thus, the group could help
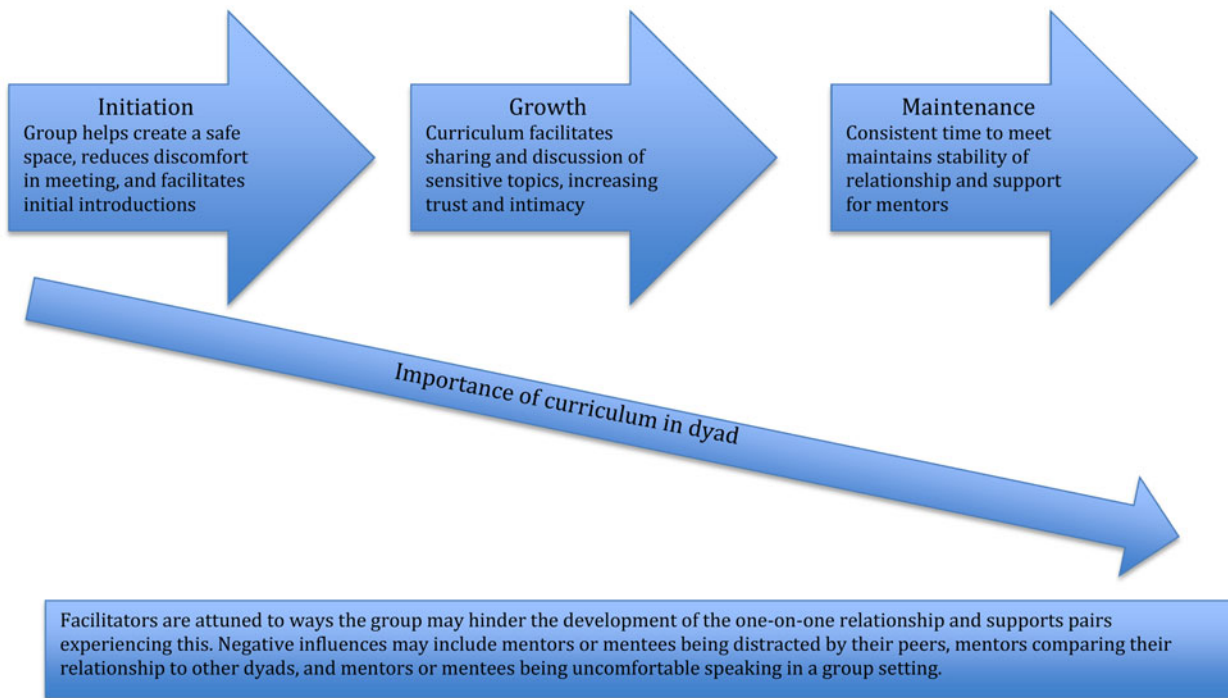
Figure 1. Process model: Group influence on the one-to-one relationship over time.

make the kickoff of the relationship feel more comfortable.

During the initiation stage, the group also gave pairs the opportunity to learn about each other through observation. Pairs learned about their similarities, their compatibility, and aspects of each others' lives and personalities by watching each other interact with other group members and engage with the curriculum. These similarities may not have been as obvious without these observations. One mentee recalled the function that the group served by stating: "If we were just alone, I would just know a couple of things about her. I wouldn't know a lot of different things that she does." Thus, the group ideally functions as a tool for easing awkwardness at the outset and deepening the one-on-one relationship more quickly.

Growth stage of the relationship: Being more open because of group context

Relationships become stronger when intimacy grows and conversations have more depth than just interests and similarities. However, creating these more intimate relationships is not easy. In fact, literature on the development of one-on-one mentoring relationships suggests that "mentors who tried to develop their relationships by pressing youth to disclose personal information or to discuss difficult issues in their lives typically were met with resistance" (Styles & Morrow, 1992, as cited in Keller, 2004, p. 90). Within a

combined group and one-on-one mentoring program the curriculum can scaffold intimacy by introducing sensitive topics in the group, removing the burden on mentors to initiate difficult conversations on their own and decreasing the perception of mentors as pressing youth for personal information. Both mentors and mentees described the culture of the group as fostering intimacy in the relationship early on in a way that was acceptable to both the mentee and mentor. Indeed, learning to trust people more through the group was a common outcome discussed by girls in YWLP (Deutsch et al., 2013, 2017), demonstrating how the group context can support dyadic relationships through encouraging a culture of sharing, support, and trust. This was reflected in comments such as: "I think it's easy to be open when you have other people your age around and they're going through the same sort of things;" "I think that being with the group actually – like since I was a little nervous and shy about exposing my business to everybody, as I did it, it helped me learn that it was okay to do that;" and "It would have probably have taken us a longer time to get close … I feel like in the group it fostered communication." Even if the mentee was more open during sister time than during the group, the group set the stage for the topics discussed in that one-on-one time, giving permission for the mentor to raise sensitive issues. Once the one-on-one relationship is fully mature, we speculate that this function of the

group may be less important. This may be why some pairs described the group curriculum as stifling interactions in the dyad.

Maintenance stage of the relationship: Structures supporting the relationship

Group structures that help maintain the quality of the relationship over time include consistent meetings and mentors feeling supported by the facilitator and other mentors. We propose that having more one-on-one time within groups during the maintenance stage of the relationship may be important. Whereas the group served an important function in providing a foundation for trust and communication within pairs, the structured curriculum may become less critical as the dyadic relationships deepen. Indeed, one of the common negative influences of the group cited by participants was how the curriculum could lessen the one-on-one time that the mentors and mentees had to spend together. The group could be thought of as a scaffold for the one-on-one relationships, providing the stability and mentor support necessary to strengthen relational growth. The curriculum supports the development of intimacy within the dyad, but can be lessened as the one-on-one relationship gains in strength. This does not mean that the group does not have a role to play during the maintenance stage. Prior research has demonstrated the importance of the support that mentors provide each other in the program (Marshall, Lawrence, & Peugh, 2013; Marshall, Lawrence, Williams, & Peugh, 2015) and the ways in which the group may influence youth outcomes (Deutsch et al., 2013, 2017). Yet being attuned to the changing needs of dyads in relation to the group may help programs optimize the functions of the group over the course of a program, targeting group activities and role to the stages of the mentoring relationship. It is also likely that those needs will differ across dyads. Pairs in which one member is more introverted or struggles with trust in relationships may benefit from more group participation longer into the life of the mentoring relationship.

Implications for developmental theory

The "ideal" process model we generated contributes to developmental theory, demonstrating ways in which the ecology in which a dyad is nested can be capitalized upon to strengthen the relationship. Relational developmental systems theory has been typically envisioned as considering the individual-context relations influencing an individual's development. Our study suggests that the theory can be expanded by thinking about how dyadic and individual interactions with the context influence the development of a dyad. We focused on considering individual dyad ← group context relations within relational developmental systems theory. The inclusion of additional adults and youth during the formation of the mentoring relationship provided an opportunity for additional assets within the ecology of both the individuals and the dyad as a whole, which could then encourage growth in a positive direction (Overton, 2015). Thus, dyad interactions with the context of the group shaped the development of the dyad through the initation, growth, and maintenance stages of the one-on-one mentoring relationship. Our process model also adds to recent research that illustrates that relationships outside of a mentor-mentee pair can influence interactions in the one-on-one mentoring relationship.

Implications for practice

Research on after-school programs suggests that it is important for there to be a good fit between the structures of a context and the individual youth (Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011), and not all interventions will be appropriate for all youth or beneficial in the same way (Deutsch, Blyth, Kelley, Tolan, & Lerner, 2017). Our findings suggest that when practitioners delivering the YWLP integrate the strengths of the one-on-one mentoring component and the strengths of the group component, there is the potential that the program could be a good fit for youth with different types of personalities. For instance, although a group context may generally not be expected to be a good fit for quieter youth, our findings suggest that coupling the group with sister time may improve the fit by providing a space for quieter youth to open up on topics that arose during group and receive on-time support if something arose with another group member. Thus, although youth who blossom in front of their peers may be likely to open up more during the group component, youth who are quieter can take advantage of the opportunity to open up during the one-on-one component of the YWLP. This research adds to a number of other benefits individuals experience by participating in the YWLP group such as self-esteem and relational skills (Deutsch & Melton, 2017).

In order to effectively integrate these two components of the YWLP, facilitators can support mentors in recognizing that the group is not a separate entity from the one-on-one component; rather the group can be a tool to support dyads. Mentors in programs

are often educated to the fact that mentor and mentee relationships develop over different trajectories. Group facilitators can also communicate that the function of the group may change over time as the one-on-one relationship develops. Facilitators can then monitor the function of the group for different dyads and empower mentors to see the group as an asset to their relationship. In this study mentors generally used the comparative context of the group to evaluate their own relationship but only a handful took advantage of the comparative context to learn strategies from others on how to improve their relationship. Thus, facilitators can encourage mentors to use this comparison to support their relationship, reminding mentors that individual relationships may be in different stages while also encouraging a growth mindset that could facilitate a positive framing of the trajectory of their own one-on-one relationship (Dweck, 2006).

Limitations and future research

The focus of this study was transferability rather than generalizability (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Future research should empirically test the exploratory model presented. Although the large sample size of our study enabled us to make statements around the processes by which the group facilitated the one-on-one relationship, it limited a more nuanced exploration of the development of specific dyads. Future research could focus on interviewing a smaller sample of dyads to explore whether the stages unfold within a number of case studies, and, if so, how it unfolds. A focus on a smaller sample of interviews would also enable an in-depth look at how the processes in each stage may vary in same-race matches versus cross-race matches. This would be informative for practitioners.

In addition, this study collected retrospective accounts which may have led some participants to interpret past experiences through the lens of how they felt about the program after it ended. Future research could explore the role of the group across the course of a year to identify the ways that interviewees discuss the function of the group differently in early versus later interviews. This would enable one to explore whether there are certain structures of group experiences that are important to have at different points in the development of a one-on-one relationship within combined group and one-on-one programs. Given that we did find that regular group meetings could provide stability to pairs that did not meet regularly outside of the group, future analyses should systematically compare the function of the

group for those who were meeting regularly compared to those who were not. Finally, one goal of the current study was to generate theory on the processes that occur in combined group and one-on-one mentoring programs. In order to test whether the function of the group benefits the development of one-on-one relationships, future research could explore the development of one-on-one relationships across time in a one-on-one mentoring program and in the YWLP. Despite the limitations of the current study, it helps inform relational development systems theory by demonstrating that mentoring dyad development interacts with context.

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