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ARTICLE

Understanding mutuality: Unpacking relational processes in youth mentoring relationships

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Abstract
Evidence suggests that a close interpersonal bond is important for the success of youth–adult mentoring relationships. Mutuality has been suggested to be important for developing a close interpersonal bond (Rhodes, 2002, 2005), but mutuality remains an abstract construct, difficult to understand and cultivate. Using thematic analysis of mentor and mentee ($n = 42$) interviews, we investigate how mentoring pairs reflect on mutuality. Results suggest that mutuality is understood as a combination of 2 dimensions: shared relational excitement and experiential empathy. Shared relational excitement is felt when there is a genuine desire by both the mentor and the mentee to invest in the relationship. Experiential empathy is the process through which mentors connect with, advise, and normalize the experiences of their mentees by sharing their own relevant experiences. This work has implications for mentor training, program development, and future research on youth–adult relationships.

Youth mentoring has been linked to numerous positive behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes for youth (Deutsch, Reitz-Krueger, Henneberger, Futch Ehrlich, & Lawrence, 2017; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Consequently, mentoring has grown in popularity, with approximately 4.5 million youth participating in formal mentoring relationships as of 2014 (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). Whereas it is encouraging that mentoring relationships can have such beneficial outcomes, these relationships can also end poorly, as well as having negative effects on the youth and mentors involved (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007; Spencer, 2007). In response to this risk, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how to develop and support positive and effective mentoring relationships. Despite the recent surge in mentoring literature, there is still a considerable gap in our understanding of which mentoring processes generate lasting benefits for youth (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Thus, our research is situated amongst work that seeks to further our understanding of how to promote and develop efficacious mentoring relationships. In particular, we are focused on the relational process of mutuality.

1 | LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 | Close interpersonal relationships: The "active ingredient" in youth mentoring

Many common models of youth mentoring posit that a close, interpersonal bond between a mentor and mentee is necessary for the success of the mentoring relationship (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). To illustrate this point, Rhodes (2002) pens the powerful metaphor that a close interpersonal bond is the "active ingredient" of the mentoring relationship (p. 36). Recently, empirical and theoretical work (e.g., Cavell & Elledge, 2014; McQuillin, Strait, Smith, & Ingram, 2015) has expanded on the early relational models of mentoring; challenging the field to consider how shorter-term and more instrumental approaches may also be effective. Despite this, many mentoring programs still rely on relational models of mentoring which place interpersonal bonds at the center of their programming. As a result, understanding how these bonds operate is important for the field.

Close interpersonal bonds have been defined by the relational processes that make them possible (see Nakkula & Harris, 2014; Spencer, 2006). For example, in one of the most common relational models of youth mentoring, Rhodes (2002, 2005) characterizes a close interpersonal bond by the relational processes of empathy, trust, and mutuality. Yet little to no concrete definition of these processes is provided. In recent years, qualitative work has emerged to begin unpacking relational processes related to these constructs, such as attunement (Varga & Deutsch, 2016; Pryce, 2012), and trust (Griffith, Larson, & Johnson, 2017). Nevertheless, there remains a lot unknown about these processes. As such, scholars have put forth a call to better understand the underlying relational processes that foster close mentoring relationships (Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, & Varga, 2016; Keller, 2005; Nakkula & Harris, 2014). Mutuality, in particular, remains an unclear and abstract concept and, thus, is the focus of the current study.

1.2 | Mutuality: The elusive ingredient

Toward the end of the 20th century, relational psychology emerged as a counter to the dominant psychological narrative that normative growth is a movement from dependence to independence. Instead, relational psychology posits that individuals develop while in relationship with others, making the normative trajectory of growth one of dependence to *interdependence* (Miller, 1976). For relational psychologists, mutuality is the relational process at the forefront of growth and development (Miller, 1986, 1988; Surrey, 1987). As such, it is linked to numerous positive outcomes (Jordan, 1991; Josselson, 1992).

Mutuality has been defined in various ways by different scholars. Genero, Miller, Surrey, and Baldwin (1992) describe mutuality as "the bidirectional movement of feelings, thoughts, and activity between persons in relationships" (p. 36). Jordan (1991) defines mutuality in terms of willingness and ability to reveal one's inner states, needs, and experiences, and valuing of the process of knowing and learning about the other. A mutual relationship, for Jordan, is one in which all parties are open and receptive to the impact another may make on them and in which there is a sense of shared emotional availability and an active and shared initiative. For Josselson (1992), mutuality is "being with another" (p. 148). Due to the abstract nature of mutuality, it can be difficult to enact, as well as difficult to teach.

Psychology's dominant narrative of the self further complicates the field's ability to understand and operationalize mutuality. Scholars argue that this focus on the individual results in a lack of language with which to talk about shared relational space (see Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976), such as experiences of mutuality. As Josselson (1992) writes "the nature of relationship has remained enshrouded partly because we have so few words and agreed-upon concepts to indicate the ways in which people connect themselves to others" (p. 2). A quarter of a century later, scholars are still seeking language to describe relational processes (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016; Keller, 2005; Nakkula & Harris, 2014). Therefore, despite its centrality to relational models of mentoring, few have empirically studied mutuality, in large part because it is difficult to describe and measure.

Some scholars have sought to put language to the experiences of mutuality, however. For example, in her book, *The Space Between Us*, Josselson (1992) writes about six expressions of mutuality: companionship, the emergent we, sharing, intersubjectivity, knowing each other, and friendship. From Miller's (1986) discussions of mutuality, Genero

and colleagues (1992) developed and validated a scale of perceived mutuality in close relationships, the only mutuality-focused scale we could find to date. Though this scale is targeted toward and validated for adult friend and romantic relationships, it measures mutuality in terms of the following six dimensions: empathy, engagement, authenticity, zest, diversity, and empowerment. Both of these examples highlight the importance of two people engaging with each other, and make steps toward creating a tangible, working definition of mutuality. However, it is important to note that these expressions and dimensions are derived from therapist–client relationships between two adult women or romantic relationships.

Due to the inherent power dynamics of a youth–adult relationship (Camino, 2000) and the unique developmental needs of adolescents, mutuality might look, feel, and be described differently in youth–adult mentoring relationships than in the adult relationships on which Genero and Josselson's work is based. Liang and colleagues recognized this and developed a measure of growth-fostering relational characteristics within a youth–adult mentoring relationship (Liang, Tracy, Kenny, Brogan, & Gatha, 2010; Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002). They created the self-report Relational Health Index–Mentor, which measures characteristics of growth-fostering relationships in youth–adult mentoring relationships. The constructs making up the measure include engagement, authenticity, and empowerment. While there is overlap between this measure and theoretical definitions and expressions of mutuality, there remains work to be done in investigating what mutuality looks like in youth–adult mentoring relationships.

If mutuality is heralded as a key function or active ingredient in the relational models of youth mentoring on which many programs are based, then training and literature should be able to equip mentors with steps to develop mutuality within their relationships. Thus, the goal of this work is to understand the dimensions of mutuality within the youth mentoring context. To do this, we rely on both previous theoretical literature and seek the perspectives of mentors and mentees. Through analysis of mentor and mentee reflections, we aim to advance an understanding of the key dimensions of mutuality within youth mentoring.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | The Young Women Leaders Program

The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) is a combined group and one-on-one mentoring program that pairs middle school girls with college women mentors. YWLP is a relationally based program, which emphasizes the formation of a bond between the mentor and the mentee. Mentees are nominated by school officials for being at risk for poor social, academic, and/or emotional behavior. Groups of 8 to 10 mentoring pairs meet at the girls' schools for 2 hours after-school, once a week, throughout the school year. The meetings include group and one on one activities targeting issues such as academics, body image, relational aggression, and problem solving (Lawrence, Sovik-Johnston, Roberts, & Thorndike, 2009). Additionally, pairs meet individually outside of group for a minimum of 4 hours per month. The pair selects the activity, which typically involves doing homework, going out to dinner, attending a local event, etc. Data for this study come from a 5-year follow-up study at the original YWLP site, which was approved by the university's institutional review board.

2.2 | Participants

At the conclusion of the mentoring year, each mentee completed a relationship satisfaction scale (Rhodes, 2002). Five years after program participation, mentors and mentees from across three program years were asked to take a follow-up survey. There was a 47% ($n = 103$) response rate for completion of the survey. Contributing to the low response rate was the inability to contact over half of the original sample often due to out of date contact information or lack of current local school enrollment (presumably due to relocation; for mentees). However, those who conducted the follow-up study were fairly representative of the original study sample in terms of race and socioeconomic status. In the original sample, 48% of the girls identified as Black, 29% identified as White, and 23% identified as other; and 59% qualified for

free or reduced lunch prices. In the follow-up sample, 53% of the girls identified as Black and 27% identified as White, while 56% of the sample qualified for free and reduced lunch.

Of those that took the follow-up survey, we invited mentors and mentees from the pairs with the highest and lowest relationship satisfaction scores on the initial survey (immediately following the program 5 years prior) to participate in an individual interview to investigate the effects of the mentoring program on individuals 5 years later. We purposefully sampled pairs with the highest and lowest relational satisfaction. These pairs represent the range of heterogeneity of relational experiences in the program as well as the most extreme cases of positive and negative relationships, both of which are theoretically important to our question (Maxwell, 2005). Mentee response rate was 86% across the 3 years, resulting in 43 interviews. The mentor response rate was 46% across the 3 years, resulting in 23 interviews. Dyadically, a total of 23 mentor and mentee pairs participated in follow-up interviews.

Of the mentees, 68% self-identified as Black, 19.5% White, 9.8% Latina, 4.9% Asian/Pacific islander, 4.9% Native American, and 2.4% identified as mixed raced; and 51% qualified for free and reduced lunch. Of the mentors to complete the demographic survey, 47.4% self-identified as White, 15.8% Black, 10.5% "other," and 5.3% Latina; and 58% reported having mothers with a 4-year college degree or higher.

2.3 | Interviews

Interviews were semistructured and lasted about half an hour. Trained research assistants conducted the interviews in person or over the phone. All interviewers were White women in their 20s–30s. Questions asked participants to reflect on their time in the program with special attention to their relationship with their mentor or mentee. Example questions include "What was the best part of your relationship with your mentee?" and "What made you trust your mentor?" Interview questions such as these prompted the discussion of mutuality throughout various moments in the interviews. By conducting interviews 5 years after program participation, we were able to explore the most salient and persistent experiences for participants (Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008), which included mutuality for both mentors and mentees. Participants were compensated $20 for their time. All names are pseudonyms, selected by the participant. An independent company then transcribed the interviews, which members of the research team checked for accuracy and uploaded into Dedoose software (Version 6.1.18) for analysis.

2.4 | Analyses

In the initial coding phase, the larger research team, comprising eight White women in their 20s–40s, including undergraduate students, graduate students, research staff, and the principal investigator, developed data-driven codes by conducting systematic readings of both mentor and mentee interviews and discussing emergent themes. These data-driven codes were combined with codes suggested from literature such as empathy, trust, and mutuality from Rhodes' model of youth mentoring (Rhodes, 2002, 2005), to develop a codebook to be used for analysis. The coding training process involved members of the team coding transcripts individually and then discussing coding discrepancies in the same transcripts until everyone felt comfortable with the codebook. Throughout this training process, definitions of codes were further clarified as to allow for a consistent conceptualization of codes across all members of the coding team.

Mutuality was included as a code because of its presence in Rhodes' model of youth mentoring. However, we soon realized there was no clear definition of the concept in youth–adult relationships to draw on to guide coding (Rhodes, 2002). As such, we were left to conceptualize it ourselves. To begin this process, we subcoded for concepts such as companionship and empathy, as suggested by prior models of mutuality in adult relationships (Genero et al., 1992; Josselson, 1992). However, because of the differences between adult and youth–adult relationships, namely, the inherent power dynamics of a mentoring relationship, we sought to take a more emic approach to exploring what the data suggested about mutuality in this context. For example, we were interested in understanding in what ways the power dynamics and vertical nature of youth–adult relationships might affect an individual's experiences of Josselson's expression of sharing or Genero and colleagues' dimension of empathy.

Thus, to take an emic approach to this work, the coding team engaged in ground-level discussions of mutuality, which frequently centered on questions such as "What counts as mutuality?" and "Did having a moment around liking the same color count?" In some ways, concrete examples of commonalities, such as this last one, provided initial evidence of shared/bidirectional space. At the same time, they lacked the essence of how relational–cultural theorists were abstractly discussing mutuality. To ensure a comprehensive treatment of the topic in the data, the larger research team decided to code mutuality broadly, including all instances of basic bidirectionality and the aforementioned subcodes derived from the literature. Once the coding scheme was finalized and all coders were trained, each interview was individually coded in Dedoose by two coders. After individual coding, the two coders then met in person to reconcile all discrepancies to 100% agreement, going through each excerpt one at a time to discuss and rectify discrepancies (Hill et al., 2005).

In part, it was this process that prompted us to explore mutuality in depth, returning to the question: "What does mutuality *actually* look like between a middle school girl and a college woman?" Thus, we investigated mutuality in youth–adult mentoring relationships with a focus toward providing a clear understanding of the dimensions of mutuality.

Following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), AL and CG (the first two authors) took the 69 mentee interview excerpts initially coded as mutuality and read through them separately. We framed their reading around the question, "What does mutuality look like to middle school girls as they reflect on their mentoring relationship 5 years later?" AL and CG documented emerging themes and compared notes, followed by conducting the same process with the 44 mentor excerpts and focusing on the question, "What does mutuality look like to college woman mentors as they reflect on their mentoring relationship 5 years later?" We then analyzed the overlap of the mentor and mentee mutuality codes in the 23 dyadic pairs to compare how these perspectives converged and diverged from one another.

From this process two themes emerged as important dimensions to mutuality in the mentoring relationship: shared relational excitement and experiential empathy. The remaining four members of the research team then conducted an audit of these two themes to account for any individual biases. In this audit, 30% of the excerpts coded as mutuality were re-analyzed following the above procedures and similar themes emerged.

Additional analysis at the dyadic level provided insight into understanding how participants reflected on mutuality within their shared mentoring relationship. Based on the pairs' descriptions of shared relational excitement and experiential empathy, dyads were clustered into two groups: partially mutual and highly mutual. Fourteen pairs fell into the highly mutual category, seven were classified as partially mutual, and two lacked sufficient discussion of mutuality and, thus, could not be classified.

Highly mutual relationships met the following definition: relationships in which both parties are excited about time spent together and willing to engage in deep reciprocal sharing. In these relationships, the mentor offers sage counsel and empathy based on previous life experiences. Partially mutual relationships were defined as relationships that are predominantly focused on surface-level sharing and the task of spending time together. In these relationships, mentors tend not to freely share relevant personal experiences. It is important to note that the results of this study were developed from the analysis of a subsample of the dyadic perspectives. This subsample comprised 21 dyadic pairs, which were classified as either highly or partially mutual.

Last, we then made comparisons between the two groups to highlight the essence of relational excitement and experiential empathy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through this process, we investigated how the two dimensions played out in relationships with different levels of mutuality.

3 | RESULTS

Through analysis of participant reflections, we identified two dimensions of a highly mutual youth–adult mentoring relationship: shared relational excitement and experiential empathy. Shared relational excitement is defined as a

genuine desire by both the mentor and the mentee to invest in the relationship. Stepping beyond this excitement, experiential empathy is the process through which mentors connect with, advise, and normalize the experiences of their mentees by sharing their own relevant experiences. While these dimensions encompass many of the features of mutuality described in past literature, they ultimately provide a clearer understanding of mutuality within the context of formal youth-mentoring relationships.

In the section to follow, each dimension of mutuality will be defined. Following the definition, dyadic perspectives from highly mutual relationships will be presented and then comparisons will be drawn between mentor and mentee perspectives in these dyads. The discussion of each dimension will then conclude with perspectives from partially mutual relationships.

3.1 | Shared relational excitement

Shared relational excitement is defined as a perceived genuine desire by both parties to invest and be present in the mentoring relationship. This occurs when both mentor and mentee perceive the other is genuinely interested in knowing them. Shared relational excitement develops through the process of the pair spending quality time together during which they are both excited about the interaction. This excitement is fueled by an understanding that the time spent together is more than just an hour of their day, but rather time to feel known and mutually engage in meaningful conversation. While this can include moments of profound life sharing, it more often than not looked like two people spending intentional and undistracted time together, with no ulterior motive other than getting to know one another. For example, discussions of shared relational excitement often surfaced when participants were asked to describe their partner, share about activities they did as a mentoring pair, identify the best part of their relationship, or explain how their relationship developed. Therefore, these instances do not imply that every interaction is deeply meaningful. Instead, a mix of surface-level interactions and vulnerable moments occur on a foundation of trust, which combine to foster mutuality.

3.1.1 | Highly mutual relationships

Highly mutual pairs highlight the importance of participating in fun activities and a shared willingness to engage. Sonia, a middle school girl, recounted the fun activities she did with her mentor, Amy: "We loved movies, so we always watched movies and cooked. We would go apple picking. We would talk about just like how was school going for both of us." Amy, her mentor, shared similar stories about walking around downtown, going apple picking, and hanging out after school as they were "learning about each other" and "developing the relationship." They both told similar stories of fun times they spent together. These activities, although simple, seemed to form a foundation of shared relational excitement in both the mentee and the mentor.

While fun has been identified as an important feature to the growth and maintenance of mentoring relationships (Keller, 2005), shared relational excitement differs in that it moves beyond these fun interactions between mentors and mentees and highlights mutual effort. In addition to excitement for activities, mentees and mentors shared that effort and willingness were also important factors in feeling shared relational excitement.

When asked about the most important part of the mentoring relationship, mentor Amy emphasized the following need: "Willingness to give on both sides, kind of like give and take and being … aware that you're both learning I think is really important for a relationship to work." In this quote, Amy reflects on how not every interaction was absolutely thrilling, but their willingness to grow together and work through the challenges of developing a relationship affirmed the importance of the relationship.

Sonia, her mentee, echoes this sentiment as she reflects that "getting to know each other" is the most important part of a mentoring relationship, and in that process "you've got to be" sharing the responsibility "50/50." Working through the initial awkwardness of a new relationship and productively addressing difficulties in the relationship bolstered their perceptions of shared relational excitement.

3.1.2 | Comparing mentor and mentee perspectives

There is a unique contrast between the way mentees and mentors reflect on shared relational excitement. Emily (mentor) and Kelly (mentee) demonstrate how mentees tend to focus on describing the activities that produced shared relational excitement. Mentors, on the other hand, reflect more deeply on the meaning and purpose of their excitement. For example, when asked about the best part of the relationship, Kelly (mentee) said she "really liked all of it" because "it was really fun." She also "really liked [Emily]" and "always liked the fact that [they] hung [out]." She remembers her year in the mentoring program positively, but does not provide more reasoning about why it was fun. This exemplifies the tendency of mentees to be less reflective about why the relationship was good or fun. In contrast, Kelly's mentor, Emily explains:

> I genuinely just really enjoyed being with her, and to me, that's part of what being a friend is … being with this person and hanging out with them and doing silly things, doing fun things, doing mundane things that seem boring, but are more fun when I'm with you.

Emily can identify that the excitement and fun gave their relationship an important dimension of friendship. Mentees often highlight how important it was that their mentor was not a "mom" but more like an older sister, who gave advice without being overbearing. The dimension of friendship undoubtedly contributes to this delicate balance and unique characteristic of the mentoring program.

Further, from one mentee's perspective, shared relational excitement within a mentoring relationship looked like simply going out to eat and attending local events. However, when these activities were approached with enthusiasm, they fostered a feeling in the mentee that they were important. Jamyra reflected on her mentor spending time with her: "It was an amazing feeling to be with her and hanging out with her [because it meant] that I was worth her time." Jamyra provides insight into the effect that her mentor's relational excitement had on her positive interpretation of the impact of their time spent together.

Like their mentees, the mentors also described shared relational excitement as spending time with one another. While these shared moments of relational excitement demonstrated to the mentees that they were important to their mentor, for mentors, they provided a sense of relief from daily life. These moments allowed the mentor to step outside of the stresses of college life and spend time investing and getting to know their mentee. Louie demonstrates this when reflecting on the best part of her relationship with her mentee. She explains how she was always excited to spend time with her mentee:

> It was such a really good relief to just kind of go out into the real world and understand that school is not your life, there are other things outside of it. Have fun for a while … that was kind of the best part of our relationship.

From Louie's example, we see how shared relational excitement fostered a sense of mutuality between the mentor and mentee in a way that allowed the mentor to release the tensions of the day and invest in getting to know their mentee. As many mentors reflected on this idea of their mentoring relationships providing them with a sense of release and fun, shared relational excitement also demonstrated the potential of fostering highly mutual relationships that benefitted both mentees and mentors.

Beyond the initial relief from the routine of daily life, shared relational excitement allowed mentors to develop natural and symbiotic relationships with their mentees. For example, Mary comments on the power that shared relational excitement had in her relationship with her mentee, Shiloh. Mary reports that the key to a successful relationship is "just your willingness and openness to develop that relationship." She reflected:

> Shiloh would just talk talk talk, and she would always be willing to talk and always wanted to hang out, and some of the little sisters weren't like that and … [another mentor in the program] would struggle with that … and would get frustrated and then just kind of just be like, "Well, she doesn't want to hang out with me, so what am I supposed to do?"

In this quote, Mary is demonstrating how Shiloh's excitement toward the relationship allowed them to genuinely get to know one another through open and consistent communication. As a result, her relationship with Shiloh felt natural

and the pair could mutually engage in meaningful conversations. Mary continued to comment on the importance of openness and investment by both partners in building relationships. From mentor reflections, such as Mary's, it is clear that in the mentors' perspectives, natural symbiotic relationships flow from interactions in which both partners are willing, open, and excited about developing a relationship.

However, although relational excitement may be an important motivator for mentors and mentees alike, it is critical to recognize that mentees may not express excitement, particularly at first. Christina, a mentor, experienced this initial absence of excitement in her relationship with Dawn, her mentee. She described Dawn as "harder to come out of her shell" and "harder to get to come to events." Despite Dawn's resistance, Christina continued to be "really invested" and "tried her best to connect" with her mentee. From Dawn's perspective, it is evident that this effort paid off. Dawn recounted how the relationship developed from "okay" to "super satisfying":

> [Christina] was always trying to talk to me and stuff. I'm kind of closed off but she wouldn't just let me sit and not talk. She was always trying to get me to interact more with her and that was helpful. She was very big on talking.

This pair demonstrates how relational excitement was initially one-sided but then developed into a meaningful relationship with persistence from the mentor. In this example, we see that developing bidirectional relational excitement may be a lengthy process, requiring the mentor's continual effort even in the absence of excitement from the mentee.

3.1.3 | Partially mutual relationships

In contrast to highly mutual relationships, partially mutual relationships often involve some degree of skepticism, disinterest, or an unwillingness to open up. For example, mentee Lauren noted that she could have "been more open" with her mentor, Lizzie, or "given [her] a chance." Lauren further recognized that it was "not all [Lizzie's] fault that [their] relationship was bad," demonstrating that she was aware that she could have been more open with her mentor and the relationship takes *two* people working at it. Similarly, Nancy (mentor) described her relationship with her mentee, Alex, as "pretty safe," but she was "not sure how close [they] ever really were other than talking generally of what was going on in life and that sort of thing," highlighting the positive but shallow nature of her relationship with the mentee. In reflecting on the mentoring relationships, these partially mutual pairs recognize that their relationships had potential for additional growth. Haley (mentor) explicitly recognized that her relationship with her mentee, June, was challenging:

> [June] had a lot of walls up. She was really hard to get to know and just not very receptive. I think there was definitely potential there but for whatever reason, I couldn't break in. I couldn't tear down those barriers.

Some mentors, like Haley, although aware that their mentees were closed off toward the relationship, were not able to break down the barriers to move past surface-level interactions. These pairs often still felt positively toward each other but the quality of the relationship had potential for deepening and strengthening.

3.2 | Experiential empathy

The second key dimension of highly mutual relationships was experiential empathy, which occurs when mentors share relevant previous stories to normalize the experiences of their mentees, to give advise, and/or to connect with them. Experiential empathy seems to be a second step after the initial development of shared relational excitement in a mentoring relationship.

Given the age and position in the mentee's life, mentors have the opportunity to serve as a role model in ways that parental guardians may not be able to (for a review of benefits of nonparental adults, see Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010). They can share their relevant life experiences as a way of both relating to their mentee and indirectly advising them. It is important to note that this advising is often accomplished informally. For example, discussion of experiential empathy arose throughout the interviews, including moments in which participants were asked to share a story they remembered, describe their relationship or the development of it, reflect on what they usually talked about as a pair, or discuss the trust they shared in their relationship. Thus, these sporadic and informal moments

supported the development of experiential empathy, which served as a vital step in developing a highly mutual mentoring relationship.

3.2.1 | Highly mutual relationships

Mentors and mentees in highly mutual pairs reflected on experiential empathy similarly. While mentors articulated the importance of using their personal stories to support and normalize their mentees experiences, mentees reflected that their mentors' openness and stories helped them to realize they are not the only ones having these experiences. In reflecting on her relationship with her mentee, mentor Louie emphasized the importance of openness and understanding in a relationship: "You want to be understanding to where she is…. [I] would give her my own examples of how I progressed or how I did [something]." Louie's reflection emphasizes the importance of mentors being understanding and empathetic toward the experiences of their mentees as well as sharing their own personal stories about difficulties and progress in attempts to relate and normalize mentees' experiences.

In reflecting on this same relationship, mentee Judy stated: [I could] learn from [Louie] also since [she's] older and I'm pretty sure [she's] made mistakes and stuff. So [she] can tell you … what's life going to be like and how it's going to be kind of hard and stuff." Judy's reflection demonstrates how Louie's stories would help her to understand different difficult situations in life and expect difficulties. She also reflects on Louie's mistakes, which seem to help her to normalize and make sense of her own mistakes. Their two perspectives on this relationship reveal how Louie's emphasis on openness and understanding allowed Judy to have realistic expectations of personal difficulties and an acceptance and normalization of her own mistakes.

Destiny and Krystal's relationship also provides evidence for how mentees and mentors reflected similarly on experiential empathy. Destiny reported that she would broadly share things with her mentee, Krystal: "I didn't want to share something that she would have to deal with. I shared things in general that I've gone through that hurt me. I shared things about my family…. I feel like I opened up to her in a broad way." Similarly, Krystal's reflection demonstrates how this sharing was beneficial to their relationship in that it allowed them to better understand each other. Krystal stated: "She would just tell me a lot of her life stories that would kind of help me understand her more." Thus, although Destiny emphasized sharing only broadly about her experiences, this sharing allowed the pair to relate on past experiences, connect to one another, and grow closer. This dyad demonstrates the importance of the mentor finding some experience they can share with their mentee so they can understand each other on a new level and feel comfortable engaging in a highly mutual relationship.

Together, these dyads demonstrate that both mentors and mentees reflected similarly on experiential empathy as a means to normalize experiences, relate, and grow closer to one another.

3.2.2 | Comparing mentor and mentee perspectives

Similar to shared relational excitement, there are some unique differences in how this dimension of mutuality manifests for each participant in the mentoring relationship. For example, mentors in highly mutual relationships see the value in sharing personal life stories as a tool to support and normalize their mentees' feelings and experiences. When asked if her own experiences seemed to be helpful to her mentee, mentor Rachael responded:

> Yeah, I think it made her feel like she wasn't the only one going through this…. This is something everyone goes through and it's okay and it's not a big deal, and that's what I really tried to emphasize with her so that she doesn't get too upset or sad over any challenges she was having…. It's okay. It's totally okay. You'll get through this.

In this reflection, Rachael demonstrates the way that she is able to not only relate to her mentee through her experiential empathy but also guide her through challenges relying on her own experiences and reflecting on how she felt in those moments. This allows the mentor to have a relatable authority; the mentees are open to what the mentor is saying and trust that their counsel is wise. Additionally, Rachael uses experiential empathy to emphasize to Sally her mentee that her experiences are in fact normal for girls her age. By doing this, she shows empathy toward the trials that her mentee is facing and encourages her that she will in fact get through them. Although these mentors know that

they are not professional advisors or therapists, they feel competent to share their lived experiences as an opportunity for mentees to gain a different perspective and know that their experiences are normal.

In reflecting on their mentors sharing, mentees note the importance of this dimension to their relationship. Mentee Krystal described her mentor, Destiny, as "a mentor and a role model." She explained how this affected the level of trust and openness in their relationship:

> *I look up to her, I aspire to be like her one day when I grow up and she's a mentor because she helps me. If I call her, if I'm doing homework and it's 10:00 at night, I know I can call Destiny if I have a problem. My mom might be sleep but–hello–I always got someone I can call, any hour of the night, she's available.*

Krystal demonstrates how Destiny's position in life as a young college woman enabled Krystal to feel comfortable seeking her wise counsel in times when a parent may not be available or appropriate. Many mentees seemed open to listening to their mentors because they perceived them to be old enough to be wise, but not too old to be irrelevant.

Mentees were receptive to their mentor's advice and guidance because it seemed like their mentors were simply sharing stories from their past. For example, Shiloh, a mentee who was struggling in her relationships, reflected on her mentor giving her advice about how she handles conflict. Her mentor told her: "The way I deal with it is by just being open and upfront. Don't be talking behind people's backs. If you have an issue with a friend, talk to her about it." Shiloh's reflection demonstrates how her mentor was able to leverage her recent experiences to provide relevant and useful advice that not only normalized Shiloh's experiences with her mom and friends but also guided her in how to approach conflict.

Mentors reflect that one of the benefits of the presence of experiential empathy in a mentoring relationship is the opportunity it provides for the pair to work together to discuss the mentee's experiences. Buttercup reflected on this process, how it allowed her to work with her mentee to co-create solutions to trials in the mentee's life:

> *She would talk; I would listen. I didn't try to give her opinions. Kinda whatever was going on we worked out together, so listening or if I talked about my experience, then she could kind of say what she felt about a situation– what she wanted to do.*

Buttercup's reflection demonstrates how she uses experiential empathy in place of direct advice in attempts to allow her mentee the authority to formulate her own opinions about the best approach to solving a situation. This approach enabled Buttercup to be present in the co-construction of the solution while providing a sense of autonomy to her mentee. Therefore, from the mentor perspective, experiential empathy provides a space for mentors to share their relevant previous stories in attempts to not only empathize with their mentees but also normalize their experiences and use their experiences as a means to advise their mentees. Similarly, mentees report the importance of this experiential empathy in normalizing their experiences and helping them work through challenges.

3.2.3 | Partially mutual relationships

At the crux of experiential empathy is a willingness by both parties to openly share. In instances in which mentors were unwilling to openly share personal stories, mentees felt like they could not relate to their mentor because they lacked a deeper understanding of who they were, leading to a one-sided relationship. In many instances, this mentor's lack of sharing resulted in the mentee becoming closer to another mentor in the program, or even taking actions to pull away from their mentor, such as refusing to attend group or not responding to their mentors' attempts at reaching out. Mentee, Lauren, reflected on this idea when asked about an ideal relationship, she stated, "I would have liked for her to, like, say I was there once … you know, like I used to … do the same things that you guys like…. You know, just kind of relate to someone."

Lack of experiential empathy also resulted from mentees remaining closed off throughout their mentoring experience and never allowing their mentors to deeply relate to them. In these instances, mentors felt like there was a lack of opportunity to relate to their mentees. They could not empathize because they did not know what experiences to empathize with. Mentor Haley exemplifies this experience in her relationship with June. According to Haley, June had

a lot of walls up, which made it difficult to relate or empathize with her experiences because she would not share about them. For example, when asked if she was able to support June through something difficult, Haley responded:

> She never explicitly said but … I could tell that she was going through difficult things but she would never offer. I would kind of gently try to bring it up without being too direct or intrusive and she never bit and never really told me what was going on.

This lack of sharing does not imply that the relationships were made up of negative experiences, but rather that the majority of their time was spent on surface-level conversations about hobbies, school work, and shared interests. While surface-level conversations are invaluable to the development of a healthy relationship, and often provide space for shared relational excitement, they need to be coupled with genuine experiential empathy in order to result in highly mutual relationships. Thus, in the mentor's attempt to carefully navigate this challenge, she should spend time engaged in activities that provide opportunities in which to make surface-level connections, which may serve as a stepping stone to a deeper relationship (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger, & Lawrence, 2013; Markowitz, 2010). After this foundation of shared experiences is developed, the mentor can work toward expressing experiential empathy within their relationship to develop high levels of mutuality.

4 | DISCUSSION

Through thematic analysis of both mentor and mentee interviews, we found that mutuality in the context of youth–adult mentoring relationships was described by participants as consisting of two key dimensions: shared relational excitement and experiential empathy. Our findings are in conversation with previous outlined "expressions" of mutuality (see Genero et al., 1992; Josselson, 1992) but at the same time speak specifically to the youth–adult mentoring context. For example, shared relational excitement for participants seems to encompass both engaging in and having zest for what they are engaged in, as well as having excited for the interaction.

However, shared relational excitement goes a step beyond engagement and zest to include a genuine perceived interest in self by other, which is a vital piece for mentees to experience. In youth–adult mentoring relationships, the mentors often have to encourage the mentees to "buy in" to the relationships. This is where the perceived interest in self by others is crucial. In adult therapist-client relationships, the client has presumably already bought into the relationship, assuming they have freely chosen to enter counseling. However, in a youth–adult mentoring relationship, the mentee is often signed up by a parent and thus may enter into the relationship hesitant. It is for this reason that mentors must both engage a relationship with enthusiasm and work to ensure that the mentee perceives their genuine interest in their life and the relationship. Thus, because of the nature of youth–adult mentoring relationships, there is need for the mentor to extend beyond Genero and colleagues' dimensions of engagement and zest and foster a sense of shared relational excitement, a key dimension in the development of mutuality in this context.

Further, our findings are in conversation with prior work on relational processes in mentoring. Reports of relational excitement overlap with Pryce's (2012) findings on highly attuned pairs: "Highly attuned mentors tended to depict the relationship as a give and take…. However, mutuality, when highlighted, was driven in these matches by mentor interest in the youth (rather than by an expectation of mutuality as a way of meeting mentor needs)" (p. 293). This literature further supports our findings of the importance of mentors' consistent relational excitement in fostering mutuality with their mentee, and highlights how mutuality in the context of youth–adult relationships manifests differently than in adult relationships.

Experiential empathy is also similar to the six dimensions of mutuality measured by Genero and colleagues (1992) in that it is fostered through empathy and authenticity and can often result in the empowerment of the mentee. Both empathy and authenticity have been found to be important relational processes in building closeness within youth–adult mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2006). It may be the combination of empathy and authenticity that evokes experiential empathy and helps mentors connect with adolescent mentees, meeting their unique developmental needs.

This may be especially true as adolescents are at a pivotal point in life in which rapid change, social pressure, and identity formation are all vying for their attention (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). Thus, the presence of an older mentor who has "been there" and can both empathize and normalize their experiences are vital.

Additionally, adolescents experience an increase in the salience of authenticity of self and other as they undergo processes of identity development (Harter, 2002). As such, adolescents are very perceptive of whether or not an adult is acting genuinely toward them, which can become either a major barrier or a major catalyst in forming connection (Yu, Johnson, Deutsch, & Varga, 2017). These unique developmental contexts highlight the importance of investigating mutuality in a context specific manner.

Additional evidence for the importance of examining context-specific definitions of mutuality is found in the work conducted by Liang et al. (2008), who found that mutuality was a much less salient feature of mentoring relationships for middle school students than it was for high school or college-aged students. Therefore, although there is much overlap in the conceptualization of mutuality in different contexts, this work highlights the importance of understanding mutuality specifically in youth–adult mentoring relationships, responding to the adolescent's developmental stage. Not only does our work begin to answer the calls of mentoring scholars for a better conceptual understanding of relational processes (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016; Nakkula & Harris, 2014), but it also helps to advance the field's understanding of mutuality in youth–adult relationships.

4.1 | Implications for mentoring programs

In this way, our findings lend themselves to implications for mentoring programs in terms of selection, training, and relational activities. The foundation of a mentoring program is its mentors. However, evidence suggests that some mentors can lack an awareness or competence in the relational aspects of mentoring (McArthur, Wilson, & Hunter, 2017). Thus, the selection of mentors is a vital first step to the development of healthy mentoring relationships. In selecting future mentors, leaders should seek out mentors that are enthusiastic and willing to share openly about their life, which will help foster both relational excitement and experiential empathy. Additionally, the current study can inform and encourage current mentors by serving as a reminder that small, consistent, and genuine efforts go a long way.

Furthermore, the analytical approach taken in this work highlights the differences between highly and partially mutual relationships. In light of this approach, we find it imperative to emphasize the idea that partially mutual relationships are not necessarily indicative of actively negative relationships between a mentor and mentee. Rather, these partially mutual relationships are average relationships that have the potential to reach a new level of sharing and depth. Josselson (1992) emphasizes the notion that mutuality occurs on a "continuum from simple companionship to an intermingling of souls" (p.149). However, not all relationships need to be at the level of intermingling souls. As Varga and Zaff (2017) propose, youth experience healthy development through a complex web of relationships, with each relational tie providing varying degrees of support and relational depth. Thus, the goal of program staff and mentors should not be to push relationships to "intermingling of souls" level but to create a program space, and subsequently the relational spaces, ripe for fostering relational mutuality that is able to meet the individual youth's unique needs.

To create this space, we propose that future research should continue to explore the perceptions of mutuality at the dyadic level in youth–adult relationships, perhaps examining its presence in relation to factors such as youth age and gender or investigating potential links to youth outcomes. Additionally, future research should investigate how we can train and support mentors in developing the space for mutuality in all of their relationships with youth.

4.2 | Limitations and future directions

One clear limitation of our work is that it is solely based on the perspectives of female participants engaging in one particular combined group and one-on-one mentoring program. While mutuality is important for the health of all humans (Miller, 1976), boys, from a young age, are socialized toward independence, as opposed to interdependence

(Connell, 1995), making it more difficult to form deep and meaningful relationships beyond those socially acceptable for men (e.g., spousal relationship). That is not to say boys and men are not experiencing mutuality and connection. In fact, prior studies have found youth–adult relationships, such as mentoring, to be a space for boys to experience connection and emotionality (Garraway & Pistrang, 2010; Spencer, 2007). Way (2011) posits societal constructs of dominant masculinity restrict and dictate boys and men's relational expressions. As such, boys and men might be experiencing and expressing mutuality differently than girls and woman. Therefore, we suggest that future research should include an investigation of how adolescent men and their mentors are experiencing and fostering mutuality in their relationships.

Additionally, as with all research, the results presented here may be influenced by the perspectives of those conducting the research. Thus, the two dimensions of mutuality defined in this article may be somewhat conditional on the positionality of the research team. To account for this, we have sought to explicitly claim this as a limitation, as well as suggesting that future research continues to investigate the emergence and measurement of these two dimensions of mutuality in youth–adult relationships.

Future research and measurement should also turn attention to the potential association between mutuality and relationship quality and satisfaction. Despite the importance of mutuality for relational health (Miller, 1976), and the theorized importance of mutuality in the development of a close interpersonal bond (Rhodes, 2002, 2005), we, in our work, can only hypothesize that there is a positive association between mutuality and relationship quality. Our sampling approach targeting pairs with the highest and lowest relationship satisfaction allows us to begin to investigate a potential relationship between mutuality and relationship satisfaction. In fact, in our subsample, all pairs identified as partially mutual had mentees who had reported low relationship satisfaction scores.

Similarly, the majority of pairs identified as highly mutual had mentees who had reported high relationship satisfaction. Thus, we can hypothesize that there may be an association between mutuality and relationship satisfaction. However, it is important to note that relationship satisfaction scores were reported only for mentees, and therefore the mentor perspective of satisfaction is missing from this analysis. Additionally, because this research is exploratory in nature, we cannot make any causal claims about an association between these two constructs. Thus, in light of a lack of empirical evidence to fully support this hypothesis, we suggest that future research should build off of these proposed dimensions of mutuality to emphasize the measurement of mutuality in youth–adult relationships, as well as investigating any potential associations between mutuality and relationship quality or satisfaction.

In our work, interviews took place 5-years postprogram, when the mentees were finishing up high school. Thus, a potential limitation is that the mentees' reports may have been shaped by their developmental stage at the time of the interview. While the elapsed time is beneficial in honing in on the salient pieces of the mentoring relationship (Liang et al., 2008), there is the potential that mentee participants are reflecting differently as high school students than they would have as middle school girls. To address this limitation, we suggest that future research investigates mutuality in mentoring relationships at various developmental stages in attempts to reach a point of saturation of mentee perspectives.

An additional limitation regarding our sample is the low response rate, which has the potential of introducing the bias of those who had particularly positive experiences with the program and were thus more likely to participate in follow-up surveys and interviews. Specifically, the low response rate of mentors (46% across 3 years of interviews) may introduce positive bias into the mentor perceptions of mutuality. However, given the intentional sampling method of identifying dyads with the highest and lowest relationship satisfaction scores, we feel confident that the sample still represents various perspectives of mutuality from participants with diverse experiences within the mentoring program.

Finally, a lack of language to talk about shared relational space still remains an issue in conceptualizing mutuality. Without appropriate language to discuss shared relational space, it is difficult for mentoring participants to reflect on mutuality in their relationships. However, we present our work as another step toward creating a shared language about these important processes in not only the context of youth mentoring but also all youth–adult relationships.

4.3 | Conclusion

While the importance of a close personal bond for the success of a mentoring relationship is constantly discussed from a theoretical standpoint (Rhodes, 2002, 2005; see also Miller, 1986), there is very little empirical work about this topic. The lack of empirical work is understandable because our field has not yet agreed upon a formal definition or way of measuring key constructs such as mutuality. Additionally, mutuality, in particular, can be much a more abstract construct to operationalize than concrete, structural programming fixes, such as mentor supports, more contact between mentor and mentee, or ice breakers. Mutuality is more difficult to strategically teach and train mentors in. However, despite this difficulty, we, as field, continuously return to the importance of authentic interpersonal connection. In fact, it is the interpersonal connection that we believe is truly the catalyst for positive youth outcomes. Thus, we must be willing to carefully examine the nuances of mentoring relationships to determine how to best teach, support, and replicate close interpersonal connections between youth and adults in all settings.

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