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## YOUTH MENTORING: INVESTIGATION OF RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS

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*This research examined associations among characteristics of relationships formed in two community-based mentoring programs and their linkages with ratings of perceived benefits for youth. Volunteer mentors in a Big Brothers/Big Sisters program completed a questionnaire on a monthly basis for a period of six months, whereas undergraduate students serving as mentors through a service-learning course completed a questionnaire on one occasion only. Mentors' ratings of emotional closeness with youth were found to be associated with reports of fewer contacts with program staff and relationship obstacles in each program. Reports of more extensive amounts of mentor-youth contact and feelings of closeness were, in turn, each associated with ratings of greater benefits for youth. Findings also indicated a tendency for mentors in longer term relationships in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program to perceive greater benefits for youth, but this was evident only after controlling for a countervailing tendency of mentors in these relationships to report spending less time with youth. Implications for the design and evaluation of youth mentoring programs are discussed. © 1997 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

In recent years, mentoring programs have become increasingly popular as a preventive intervention strategy for youth. Such programs seek to establish a "one-to-one relationship between a [youth] and a caring adult who assists the [youth] in meeting academic,

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social, career, or personal goals" (Nettles, 1991, p. 139). To date, the literature on youth mentoring has focused on how to develop a mentoring program (Bryant & Wierick, 1983; Sapone, 1989), descriptions of existing programs (Education Commission of the States, 1989; Project Literacy U.S., 1990), examination of mentor characteristics (Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992) and, in a few instances, the psychosocial and academic adjustment outcomes of youth who participate in mentoring programs (Galvin, 1989; McParland & Nettles, 1991). With notable exceptions (e.g., Furano, Roaf, Styles, & Branch, 1993), investigations have not focused on issues pertaining to the characteristics of mentoring relationships themselves, such as the frequency of mentor-youth contact and feelings of closeness in relationships. Greater understanding of relationship characteristics and their implications for mentoring effectiveness could aid in the development of more successful programs. To address this concern, the present research examined relationship characteristics reported by mentors in both a Big Brothers/Big Sisters program and a university service-learning course. Associations among indices of relationship characteristics and their linkages with ratings of perceived benefits for youth are investigated.

## METHOD

### *Samples*

Participants included volunteer mentors in an affiliate agency of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America (BB/BSA) and undergraduate student mentors in a service-learning course at a large university. Both mentoring programs provided services to youth in the same medium-sized midwestern city. Of 39 volunteers currently mentoring a youth in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, 27 (69%) consented to participate in the research (12 male, 15 female). Participants were White, with the exception of 2 African American women, and ranged in age from 19 to 42 ( $M = 28.78$ ,  $SD = 6.69$ ). The youth these volunteers were mentoring ranged in age from 8 to 16 ( $M = 11.57$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) and included 2 African American and 21 White youths (data on racial and ethnic background were not reported for 4 youth). All but one of the 41 students in the service-learning course consented to participate. The 12 male and 28 female participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 ( $M = 20.62$ ,  $SD = 2.52$ ). The majority were White ( $n = 30$ ), with the remainder representing various racial and ethnic backgrounds, including African American ( $n = 4$ ) and Chicano and Latino ( $n = 4$ ). Youth being mentored ranged in age from 14 to 19 ( $M = 15.37$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), with the majority African American ( $n = 22$ ) or White ( $n = 11$ ). All youth in both programs were the same sex as their mentors. A few of the undergraduate students had also taken the service-learning class the previous semester and thus had been paired with the youth whom they were mentoring since that time.

### *Procedure*

Data were collected from Big Brothers/Big Sisters participants via a questionnaire that was mailed to them on a monthly basis over a six-month period. Students in the service-learning course completed a questionnaire during a class period approximately 12 weeks into the semester.

### Measures

The monthly questionnaire completed by Big Brothers/Big Sisters volunteers assessed a variety of characteristics of the mentoring relationship during the preceding month, including the amount of youth-mentor contact, subjective feelings of closeness toward the youth, obstacles in the relationship (e.g., arguments/disagreements), degree of contact with agency staff, and the frequency with which the volunteer and youth discussed various topics and engaged in different types of activities. Ratings were averaged across the six monthly assessments to provide summary indices of relationship characteristics.<sup>1</sup> On the final monthly questionnaire, mentors additionally rated the extent to which youth had benefited from the relationship during the 6-month period using a 4-point scale (0 = did not benefit to 3 = benefited to a great extent). The number of contacts with agency staff during this period was also reported. Participants in the service learning course completed a questionnaire that asked for the same types of information obtained from Big Brothers/Big Sisters volunteers, with the most notable difference being that resulting measures of relationship characteristics (e.g., amount of mentor-youth contact) were based on only the prior month rather than the more extended 6-month period that was possible with repeated administrations of the measure to the Big Brothers/Big Sisters sample.

### RESULTS

Approximately four fifths of the mentors in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters sample (82.6%) reported that they felt youth had received "moderate" (65.2%,  $n = 15$ ) or "great" (17.4%,  $n = 4$ ) benefits from the relationship during the indicated six-month period, with the remainder reporting a "small benefit" (17.4%,  $n = 4$ ).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the majority of mentors in the service-learning program sample felt youth had received either "great" (20%,  $n = 8$ ) or "moderate" (40%,  $n = 16$ ) benefits; a little over one third (37%,  $n = 15$ ) rated the youth as receiving a "small" benefit and one participant reported an absence of benefits.

As shown in Table 1, significant associations among indices of relationship characteristics were found for each sample.<sup>3</sup> For the Big Brothers/Big Sisters sample, mentors in relationships that had been in existence longer reported lesser amounts of contact with youth as well as fewer contacts with agency staff. Contacts with agency staff were also associated negatively with ratings of relationship closeness for this sample, as were re-

<sup>1</sup>Copies of measures and a description of the procedures used to derive all indices included in the present report are available from the first author.

<sup>2</sup>Ratings of relationship benefits are missing for two mentors who dropped out of the program prior to the completion of the study and two other participants who failed to return the final monthly questionnaire.

<sup>3</sup>Additional analyses not reported here revealed that there were significant associations within each sample between indices of certain relationship characteristics and the gender and age of the mentor, as well as the age of the youth. In view of these associations, all correlations among relationship measures were recomputed controlling for the gender and age of the mentor and the age of youth. With few exceptions, the results of these analyses replicated the pattern of significant zero-order correlations reported in Tables 1 and 2. For the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program sample, the negative associations between reports of staff contacts and ratings of closeness and relationship benefits only approached significance ( $ps < .10$ ) when controlling for age of the youth and age of the mentor, respectively. For the service-learning program sample, the same was true of the positive association between reports of discussions concerning the youth's social relationships and ratings of relationship benefits when controlling for either the age or gender of the mentor ( $ps < .10$ ).

**Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Among Measures of Relationship Characteristics and Perceived Benefits for Big Brothers/Big Sisters and University Service-Learning Programs**

Measures	Big Brothers/Big Sisters					Service-Learning				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Length of relationship (months)	—					—				
(2) Amount of contact	-.43*	—				.18	—			
(3) Closeness	.23	.35	—			.07	.55***	—		
(4) Obstacles	-.12	.05	-.47*	—		.04	.08	-.59***	—	
(5) Staff contacts	-.48*	-.26	-.51*	.26	—	.07	-.01	-.42***	.59***	—
(6) Relationship benefits	.26	.55**	.66***	-.30	-.44*	.06	.40**	.61***	-.47***	-.28

*Note.* *n* ranges from 23 to 27 for Big Brothers/Big Sisters program and from 37 to 40 for service-learning program due to missing data on various measures.  
\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

ports of relationship obstacles. For the service-learning program sample, reports of staff contacts and obstacles exhibited the same significant negative associations with ratings of relationship closeness. There were also significant positive associations between reports of staff contacts and relationship obstacles, as well as between reported amount of mentor-youth contact and feelings of closeness in the relationship.

Indices of relationship characteristics were, in turn, found to be associated significantly with ratings of relationship benefits in each sample (see Table 1). Specifically, for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters sample, reports of mentor-youth contact and closeness were each associated positively with perceived benefits for youth, whereas reports of contacts with agency staff were related negatively to ratings of benefits. Interestingly, length of the relationship was not associated significantly with perceived benefits. It will be recalled, however, that there was a significant negative correlation between length of the relationship and reported amounts of monthly contact ( $r = -.43, p < .05$ ). Accordingly, the correlation between length of relationship and perceived benefits was re-computed controlling for the reported level of average monthly contact. This analysis revealed a strong significant association between length of relationship and perceived benefits in the expected positive direction (partial  $r = .68, p < .001$ ). Further analysis indicated that the association between average monthly contact and perceived benefits remained significant when controlling for relationship length (partial  $r = .78, p < .001$ ). Together, length of relationship and average monthly contact accounted for 63% of the variance in ratings of perceived benefits.

For the service-learning program sample, reports of mentor-youth contact and closeness were again each associated positively with ratings of perceived relationship benefits for youth. In addition, reports of relationship obstacles were correlated negatively with ratings of perceived benefits. The length of the relationship was not associated with benefit ratings, even when controlling for rate of contact as was done for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters sample (partial  $r = -.14, ns$ ). This result may reflect the relatively limited range in the length of relationships in the service-learning program sample (1–7 months).

Additional analyses investigated associations between indices of discussion topics and activities and ratings of perceived benefits for youth (see Table 2). For the Big Broth-

**Table 2. Zero-Order Correlations of Measures of Discussion Topics and Activities With Ratings of Relationship Benefits for Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Service Learning Programs**

<i>Measures</i>	<i>Big Brothers/Big Sisters</i>	<i>Service-Learning</i>
Discussion Topics		
Youth's behavior	.55***	.51***
Youth's social relationships	.45*	.31*
Casual conversation	.69***	.10
Social issues	.54**	.24
Activities		
Sports/athletic	.22	.21
Recreational/non-athletic	.48**	.18
Educational/cultural	.32	.37*

*Note.*  $n = 23$  for Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs;  $n = 40$  for service-learning program.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

ers/Big Sisters sample, reports of more frequent discussions across all topic areas were associated significantly with ratings of greater benefits for youth, as were reports of engaging in recreational/non-athletic activities. For the service-learning program sample, reports of discussing the youth's behavior and social relationships as well as engaging in educational/cultural activities were associated positively with ratings of perceived benefits.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illustrate the potential value of examining associations among process characteristics of mentoring relationships as well as their linkages to relatively more distal indicators of program effectiveness, in this case mentor ratings of perceived benefits for youth. With regard to the first concern, the significant inverse association that was evident in each sample between mentor ratings of emotional closeness and their reported frequency of contact with program staff was a somewhat unexpected finding. This result may simply be reflective of a tendency for mentors to seek out assistance when they find themselves experiencing difficulty establishing strong bonds with youth. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that such contacts were apparently not sufficiently helpful to produce gains in closeness that might have overshadowed the observed negative linkage between reports of staff contacts and relationship closeness. This suggests a need for programs to examine the appropriateness of the training and assistance that volunteer mentors are afforded through formal agency supports (Furano et al., 1993). The present findings that linked perceived relationship obstacles to problems in the development of close ties between mentors and youth in each program suggest a promising starting point for efforts in this regard.

Other associations involving indices of relationship characteristics were specific to either the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program or the service-learning course. For the Big Brothers/Big Sisters sample, mentors in longer term relationships reported fewer contacts with agency staff. This finding may be a positive reflection of greater autonomy and skill among relatively more experienced mentors, some of whom had been matched with particular youth for several years. However, such mentors also tended to report relatively less extensive contact with youth and thus may not have been making optimal use of their cumulated knowledge and expertise. For the service-learning program, ratings of emotional closeness were associated with greater reported levels of mentor-youth contact. In addition, reports of relationship obstacles were linked to more frequent contacts with agency staff. These findings underscore the apparent importance of regular patterns of interaction between mentors and youths as well as the manner in which perceived relationship obstacles may invoke considerable need for staff time and resources. Such concerns may be especially relevant when attempts are made to establish effective mentoring relationships within a time-limited framework (e.g., a semester long class).

In accord with earlier research (Freedman, 1988; Furano et al., 1993; Price, Price, & Toomey, 1980; Taylor, 1982), mentors generally rated relationships as providing significant benefits to youth. These ratings varied, however, and were found to be associated significantly with several different indices of relationship characteristics. Perhaps most notably, reports of more extensive amounts of mentor-youth contact and feelings of emotional closeness in relationships were each linked to ratings of greater perceived youth benefits. This finding replicates earlier qualitative research in which Freedman (1988) found that effective mentoring relationships were characterized by continuity and con-

sistency in mentor-youth contacts (i.e., at least once-a-week) as well as strong feelings of personal closeness. Accordingly, it seems that one basic requirement for mentoring programs should be the availability of appropriate supports to insure that adult volunteers spend time with youth on a regular basis and in ways that are likely to foster close emotional bonds. Such supports might include training and on-going staff supervision, structured opportunities for mentor-youth interaction (e.g., program-sponsored events), and monitoring procedures to insure regular patterns of contact between mentors and youths.

Other relationship factors were associated with ratings of youth benefits differentially across the two mentoring programs. For the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, youth in longer term relationships were rated by mentors as receiving greater benefits. However, this type of linkage became evident only after controlling for the tendency of such youth to apparently spend less time with their mentors which was noted above. A trend toward less frequent mentor-youth contact in longer term relationships was also reported by Furano et al. (1993) in their multi-site investigation of several Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs. Unfortunately, it appears that as the benefits of longevity begin to manifest themselves in relationships, youth and mentors may begin to spend less time together and thereby not be able to fully realize the advantages that more established relationships have to offer. With regard to the service-learning course, it is interesting to note that reports of discussions focused on the youth and his or her relationships with others, as well as activities with an educational or cultural focus, were related differentially to perceptions of relationship benefits. This pattern of findings may reflect the focus of the program on academically at-risk youth, many of whom also may have been experiencing significant socio-emotional difficulties. Similarly, the more broad-based and developmentally-focused approach to mentoring reflected in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program may account for the apparent tendency of mentors in this program to perceive benefits for youth in discussions of a wider range topics as well as activities that are recreational rather than educational in nature. These possible explanations notwithstanding, differing views of effective mentoring across programs should nonetheless be investigated with regard to possible implications for the actual adaptive outcomes of the youth involved.

Several significant limitations of the present research should be noted. These include the relatively small size of the samples involved and the sole reliance on mentors as sources of information concerning process characteristics of relationships. It would clearly be worthwhile in future research, for example, to supplement mentor reports with ratings obtained directly from youth. Such reports could help to reveal important ways in which subjective youth experiences in relationships mediate the attainment of targeted program outcomes (e.g., academic success). In addition, inclusion of more in-depth, qualitative data might provide greater insight into mentoring characteristics and benefits.

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