Mentoring At-Risk Youth: an Examination of Strain and Mentor Response Strategies

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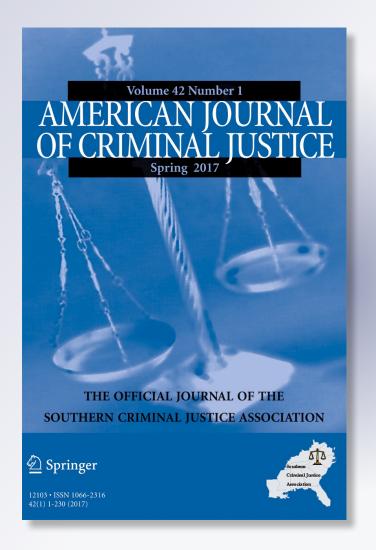# Mentoring At-Risk Youth: an Examination of Strain and Mentor Response Strategies

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Mentoring At-Risk Youth: an Examination of Strain and Mentor Response Strategies

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Abstract Mentoring is a popular and widespread intervention for at-risk youth that can positively influence this population's adaptation to stressors and increase overall resilience. Yet there is a lack of attention to how mentoring relationships work or the attributes of mentoring that contribute to successful outcomes. In this study, we employ qualitative in-depth interviews with mentors in a school-based program to learn about their perceptions of the strain experienced by their mentees, and how they respond to it during sessions. We focus on emotional regulation, conflict resolution, future orientation, and active listening - four positive coping strategies associated with enhanced resilience among at-risk youth. This study considers how these positive strategies fit into mentors' descriptions of their approaches and the implications for intervention programming.

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Introduction

Mentoring has long been touted a viable intervention by advocates for at-risk youth, though the extant scientific literature tends to be more cautious about the approach's empirical benefits (Bernstein et al., 2009; Wheeler, Keller, & Du-Bois, 2010; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). While "at-risk" is a broad classification, it typically encompasses youth who due to socioeconomic disadvantages are more susceptible to negative life outcomes though not yet labeled delinquent (Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008). Mentoring involves a supportive relationship between a youth and adult who is not a caregiver and is intended to positively impact identity development, relationships, and well-being (DuBois & Silvertorn, 2005; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Fifty to 80 % of American youth report having a meaningful relationship with a mentor (Goldner & Mayseless, 2009), with about 30 % of these relationships formally arranged through an organization (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). The *Mentoring in America* poll (MENTOR, 2006) estimates there are approximately 5000 mentoring programs and nearly two million youth served annually. School-based mentoring (SBM), during which mentors meet with at-risk youth regularly in the school setting, is the most rapidly increasing format (Rhodes, 2014; Wheeler et al., 2010; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012) and is the arrangement for about a quarter of current mentoring programs (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007).

Most extant research about mentoring tends to focus on processes and outcomes unrelated to delinquency (see Miller, Barnes, Miller, & McKinnon, 2012 for an overview). The few large-scale examinations of SBM find some support for this type of mentoring, but are likely to have obscured key elements of relationship dynamics (Wheeler et al., 2010; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). Wood and Mayo-Wilson (2012) urged further research to examine ways to improve the duration and quality of mentoring relationships, as most of these tend to be short-lived. Indeed, while higher relationship quality is thought to lead to better youth outcomes, these components are examined infrequently (Keller & Pryce, 2012). Qualitative research about dynamics within mentoring relationships has made inroads, with one study finding that active listening among SBM mentors enhanced the quality of their relationships with at-risk middle schoolers (Converse & Lignugaris, 2008). Spencer's work (2006, 2007) emphasizes that relational processes which support attributes like authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship exist in strong mentoring relationships and are missing in those that fail. Relatedly, Pryce (2012) examined the levels of mentors' emotional attunement to their mentees, finding highly attuned mentors to most effectively enhance the success of, and satisfaction with, these relationships. Pryce and Keller (2013) subsequently used a mixed-methods approach to examined four patterns of interpersonal tone that help categorize and contextualize SBM relationships. Overall, the dynamics within the SBM relationship remain qualitatively understudied and there are increased calls for empirical attention as this approach gains popularity (Karcher & Herrera, 2007; Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013).

Background

Mentoring for At-Risk and Justice Involved Youth

Mentoring has been embraced as an intervention for misconduct and delinquency among at-risk and justice system involved youth. Mentoring for at-risk and system involved youth has yielded mixed reports of actual effectiveness (Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008; Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Newburn & Shiner, 2006; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012), although participants tend to report positive experiences in mentoring relationships (Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005; Laakso & Nygaard, 2007; Thomson & Zand, 2010). Prior work, including meta-analyses, however, reveal a relatively small effect size and show that outcomes related to delinquency vary considerably or are rarely evaluated (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois et al., 2011; Newburn & Shiner, 2006; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). This is particularly unfortunate as mentoring programs have been rapidly developed and implemented but often with very little attention to best practices. Many organizations and reports funded by these organizations tend to sing the praises of mentoring (see, for example, Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014), although closer examinations of study designs and findings can yield alternative interpretations of evidence. As a result, strong evidence for the effectiveness of mentoring as a delinquency intervention continues to elude the extant literature.

Mentoring initiatives are typically designed to increase the resiliency and capacity of at-risk youth to overcome challenges associated with long-term negative social and behavioral outcomes (e.g., arrest, school drop-out) (Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006; Rak & Patterson, 1996). Resilience is considered to be a function of, in part, strong socioemotional bonds with individuals in positive, predictable relationships. Research suggests that at-risk youth who are involved with at least one caring adult may be more likely to overcome the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, family dysfunction, and exposure to violence (Blechman, 1992; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). In the absence of familial and peer support, it is reasonable to expect that at-risk youth may benefit considerably from a relationship with an adult mentor.

Strain and At-Risk Youth

Theoretical Background

The lives of at-risk youth include poverty, violence, social exclusion, limited social capital and education, "empty families", and inequality (Schaffner, 2006; Wesely, 2012). According to the National Poverty Center, the number of children living in deep poverty (i.e., income 50 % below the poverty threshold) more than doubled between 1996 and 2011 (Shaefer & Edin, 2012). In addition to substandard food and shelter provisions, the households of economically disadvantaged youth are crowded, noisy, and physically deteriorated (Evans, 2004; Evans & English, 2002; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005). Such chaotic conditions tend to adversely affect youths'

socioemotional development (Evans, 2006; Evans & Wachs, 2010; McLoyd, 1998). Advocates of mentoring suggest it may possess the potential to mitigate these negative effects, particularly in the fast-growing SBM sector.

Strain is one way to conceptualize the detrimental conditions and events in the lives of at-risk youth. The concept of strain enjoys a long theoretical history in criminology and has been linked with a variety of problem behavior, including delinquency (Agnew, 1992; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938). Agnew's general strain theory (1991) describes strain as the result of one (or more) of the following three conditions: 1) removal of positive stimuli, 2) introduction of negative stimuli, or 3) failure to achieve positively valued goals. The strains common to at-risk youth typically result from an inability to avoid negative environmental stimuli (Agnew, 1992). These strains' impact is conditioned in part by individual coping mechanisms that determine whether or not an adolescent turns to problem behavior as a means of stress management. Strain also tends to have a cumulative effect, increasing the likelihood of negative emotions, especially anger (Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002). Negative emotionality is a key link between strain and unhealthy coping strategies like delinquent behavior (Agnew, 2001; Agnew et al., 2002; Bao, Haas, & Pi, 2004; Hollist, Hughes, & Schaible, 2009).

Research suggests that individual resilience can mediate strain and negative adaptations (Agnew, 1992; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; Broidy, 2001). Resilience is "the psychological ability to successfully cope with severe stress and negative life events" (OJJDP, 2009, p. 1). Prior studies of resilience have examined strategies at-risk youth engage to positively cope with stressors (Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002; Hampel & Petermann, 2006). Existing research describes four coping strategies central to building resilience to strain: *emotional regulation, conflict resolution, future orientation* and *active listening* (Aronowitz, 2005; Kyzer, 2001; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007; Zins & Elias, 2007).

Coping Strategies to Strain

Emotional regulation refers to "the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them and how they experience and express these emotions" (Gross, 1998, p. 275). Positive emotionality supports healthy coping by individuals experiencing high-stress situations (Gross, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). For example, when testing adolescent reactions to anger provocation, Mauss, Cook, Cheng, and Gross (2003) found a link between emotional regulation strategies and reduction of negative emotional impacts. One study with preschoolers found that an emotion-based prevention program helped them regulate emotions (Izard, King, Trentacosta, Morgan, Laurenceau, Krauthamer-Ewing, & Finlon, 2008), though this has not been widely investigated in programs for at-risk adolescents.

The coping strategy of conflict resolution requires the skill to establish cooperative problem-solving relationships with others and an ability to look at conflict from an outside perspective (Bullock & Foegen, 2002; Deutsch, 1994). Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Mitchell, and Fredrickson (1997) reviewed the effects of a middle school conflict resolution training program which yielded some successful outcomes, but there is little evidence of its application to at-risk populations. Most studies of conflict

resolution programs in schools have generally occurred at suburban or rural schools in public school systems not characterized by the widespread poverty and disadvantage to which most at-risk youth are exposed (Johnson et al., 1997).

The third coping strategy, future orientation, refers to the expectations, hopes, and fears individuals have about their futures and the tools they have developed to attain their goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This takes on increased importance during the transitional adolescent period (Aronowitz, 2005; Nurmi, 2005), though the promotion of future orientation among at-risk adolescents has not been studied extensively. Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002) developed a 9-week after-school activities-based intervention with three cohorts of low-income urban African American middle-schoolers that focused on youths' abilities to imagine future possibilities for them-selves. Results indicated that this intervention had the capacity to positively shift youths' self-concepts.

Finally, the coping strategy of active listening refers to giving complete attention to the speaker, asking relevant questions and responding to both verbal and nonverbal messages (Gordon, 2003; Hoppe, 2006; Jalongo, 1995). Active listening may play a central role within support processes for adolescents (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Gearhart & Bodie, 2011; Jones, 2011). As noted above, one study of at-risk middle-schoolers in a SBM program examined how mentors engaged active listening (Converse & Lignugaris, 2008), but programs designed to work with students on enhancing their listening strategies have focused primarily on college-level and pre-professional cohorts.

The Current Study

Mentoring programs hinge on the idea that the presence of caring adults can make a positive difference with at-risk youth. Yet "our knowledge of the processes at work in higher quality mentoring relationships skims the surface" (Spencer, 2006, p. 288). Scholarship finds mentoring influential on at-risk adolescents' resilience and adaptation to stressors (see DuBois & Silvertorn, 2005; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002), however, literature identifying how mentors perceive and respond to mentees' strain within the relationship is sparse. In this exploratory study, we attempt to address this gap. Using qualitative, in-depth interviews with mentors in a SBM program, we examine how they perceived strain in their mentees' lives and how they responded to it. Further, we consider how the four positive coping strategies known to enhance resilience fit into mentors' variant approaches.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

This study is based on information gathered from in-depth qualitative interviews with 13 mentors in a southeastern metropolitan branch of a national mentoring program. For the purpose of the paper, the local affiliate is called "Scholastic Mentors." We drew from two middle schools in the Scholastic Mentors program, labeled here "Miller Middle" (MM) and "Jones Junior" (JJ), both located in neighborhoods with average

household incomes below the national poverty guidelines (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Our relationship with Scholastic Mentors was facilitated by 6 months of volunteering and subsequent full-time employment of one author with Scholastic Mentors. Cooperation was secured from the Executive Director of Scholastic Mentors.

Scholastic Mentors staff paired volunteer mentors with same-sex early adolescents entering the sixth grade who are designated as "at-risk" based on academic, behavioral, or family counseling referrals. Before being matched with mentees, volunteers completed a 2-h basic training session. Following training, Scholastic Mentors staff members explained this project to mentors and requested their voluntary participation. Initially, staff members were able to secure the participation of ten mentors at each school. The second author provided an additional 45-min training session to the ten participating mentors at one of the two schools (MM). The purpose of this session was to overview the four positive coping strategies of emotional regulation, conflict resolution, future orientation, and active listening. The ten participating mentors at the second school (JJ) did not receive this additional training. Originally, we intended to ascertain if the additional training in positive coping strategies resulted in noticeable differences for the mentoring relationship or the adolescent's response to strain. However, mentor dropout rates during the interview phase of this project (final total of seven participants at MM and six participants at JJ) necessitated that this comparative analysis be discontinued. Given the lack of existing research about the dynamics of mentoring, we instead focused on the skills and strategies found to be most useful within this type of relationship.

During the fall of 2012, mentors met with their mentees an average of 1 h per week, usually during students' lunchtime or immediately after school. Mentoring sessions occurred in a quiet location on school grounds and included activities such as discussing the mentee's life, sharing a meal, playing games, and completing homework. Mentors were interviewed between December 2012 and February 2013, following roughly 3 months of mentoring. Interviews were usually conducted at the school in a private room, though a few interviews took place off-site to accommodate participants. Interviews were audio-recorded onto an iPad for later transcription and lasted for approximately 1 h. All mentors chose pseudonyms for the purposes of this study. The age of mentors ranged from 19 to 64 years, with the average being 42. Five mentors (38.5 %) were female while eight (61.5 %) were male. Of the thirteen mentors interviewed, ten (76.9 %) self-identified as Caucasian and three (23.1 %) as African-American.

Data Collection

The interview was guided by a structured interview schedule. These topics served as a general outline and were followed up by typical probes used in in-depth interviews to uncover more detailed accounts of the mentor's relationships. Consequently, questions evolved based on the responses received from each subject. This type of semi-structured interviewing allowed respondents to reflect on their mentoring relationships while providing the researcher some discretion in guiding the interview (Esterberg, 2002; Spencer 2006). Specific questions addressed the mentor's background, motivations for mentoring, a typical mentoring session, sources of mentee problems, stress

and strain, mentor responses to mentee strain, and perceptions of the mentoring relationship. The subset of questions dealing with mentor's responses to mentee strain differed slightly among the participants from MM (who had received the positive coping strategies training) and JJ schools (who had not). Specifically, when posed to MM mentors, these questions identified the four positive coping strategies. Questions for the JJ interviewees asked what techniques mentors engaged, but did not initially name the four strategies directly. Once a technique described by JJ participants corresponded to the definition of a positive coping strategy, we identified it accordingly and probed for further details in a manner consistent with interviews with MM mentors. This allowed the researcher to identify the degree to which the identified coping strategies were organically employed within the mentoring environment.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto a secure university server. Then each transcript was reviewed multiple times to enhance familiarity with the data. We used a two-stage coding process. First, open coding (Esterberg, 2002) allowed us to distinguish themes/categories across the transcripts. This involved organizing significant themes from the interviews into more narrow subthemes/categories that were coded manually. After categories began to emerge, the second phase involved focused coding (Esterberg, 2002), which distinguished specific examples of themes within the interview transcripts. This also helped to outline connections among sub-themes. Information and quotes central to each theme were clustered by code. These strategies have been shown to make patterns more easily identifiable (Hsiung, 2010). We remained open to any disconfirming evidence or cases that did not support the themes identified earlier in the process.

Findings

Mentors' Perceptions

Perceptions of Strain in the Mentees' Lives

When queried about challenges in their mentee's lives that served as sources of strain, mentors most commonly identified the home environment and family relationships. For example, "Shirley's" mentee experienced abuse and chronic instability following the termination of her mother's custodial rights. Shirley described her mentee's life situation:

> It was a bad scenario. She alluded to sexual abuse. By the time she got [here], she was with a foster home, she had gotten taken from her mom, and then they put her in another foster home, and then there was an incident and they had to pull her out of there, and they put her in a foster home, and they had moved again . . . there was zero, not much stability . . . If you're a 10-year-old kid and you're taken from your mom, and you're going from foster home to foster home, sleeping in a different bed and a different family's bed, and siblings telling you, "Don't touch my stuff, that's my bed, you're not going to stay here long." And so there was no consistency.

Mentors also heard their mentees express feelings of being uncared for or ignored. "Cameron" stated of his mentee, "His parents aren't together either. You have relationships with your parents where you know, 'I feel like my mom doesn't care,' or, 'My dad moved on without us'." This description resonates with the concept of "empty families" (Wesely, 2012; Schaffner, 2006), the neglectful or chaotic households in which children's needs are unidentified or unmet because of parental crises and deficiencies. Empty families can result in a "parentified child," someone "who takes care of everyone else in the family, doing parenting work, often for her own parents, often for younger siblings" (Schaffner, 2006, p. 96). "Mr. Nice Guy" observed this scenario with his mentee, saying, "He's responsible for a lot at home because both of his parents work. So I would say taking care of his brothers and stuff like that, because he's pretty much running everything with them." Another mentor, "John," learned that his mentee's high absenteeism rate was because his mother kept him home to babysit his sister, resulting in a truancy officer contact. Other mentors were concerned about their mentees in low-income neighborhoods with high crime rates. "Yuri" believed where his mentee lived was dangerous and stressful since "cops were driving by the house and that he mentioned hearing gunshots one night."

There is also evidence indicating at-risk youth stressed at home are also often distracted in school (Davis-Kean, 2005; Sirin, 2005). Academic challenges thus become both a manifestation and additional source of strain. Cameron described,

> It's like with anything else, if you're stressed out about something, or if something is bothering you, it might change how you interact with people around you. So he might have bad days that he wouldn't have had if he wasn't stressed at home. To the extent of, sometimes I wonder if he's isolating, pulling back in certain situations. It's kind of, he had a rough weekend at one parent's house and, because of that, now he doesn't really want to talk to his teacher about this.

A theme among mentors was that while they felt their mentees were intelligent or talented, stressors distracted them from academics. "Stein" said of his mentee, "He's not in danger of failing. He's very, very smart with math, and in reading, which is crazy. Language arts and science, I think it boils down to lack of interest and his lack of paying attention to detail and being distracted." "Marie" responded similarly about her mentee:

> She's getting 'Bs and 'Cs but this is a young lady who should be [getting] 'As and 'Bs. You know, again, there's no behavioral problems or authority defiance. I mean, she's really a pretty good kid . . . just being distracted. I'm not sure if anyone else besides the teachers here are challenging her or applying expectations.

Shirley said of her mentee (who had been in multiple foster homes), "So mentally, that lack of stability and that movement . . . precludes her from even thinking about studying. And ironically, she's a very bright student."

As discussed above, adolescent strain increases the likelihood of negative emotions, which are in turn linked to unhealthy coping behaviors. Many mentors perceived negative emotions in their mentees resulting from strain. For instance, "Jeff" observed,

"I see a sense of disappointment in his eyes when he knows the consequence of his actions has resulted in poor grades." Since mentors tended to ask mentees about emotions after hearing about behavior problems, emotion and behavior intertwined in interview responses. For example, Shirley described her mentee's anger and fighting: "Well, when she was at school, the fighting started. There was a lot of discussion about what to do with her anger…her way of dealing with that is to fight because that's how she was taught by her mom." Stein's mentee, who had an unstable home life, felt victimized by others but acted out as a bully even to his siblings, ripping up their homework and throwing their dinners on the floor:

> He feels like he gets picked on when, in fact, he picks on everybody else . . . For whatever reason he's really aggressive towards females, as far as hitting, and yelling, and arguing, and names, racism with them, all kinds of…it's been a constant challenge that we've been working on. But he's, he gets really combative, it's almost to a point where he, like, bullies them. But he feels like he's being bullied.

Mentors' Responses to Mentees' Strain

Stress and strain in the lives of mentees were frequent topics of mentoring conversations. Mentors typically responded in ways they perceived as most useful to the mentee and the relationship. Often, but not always, these techniques aligned with one of the four positive coping strategies. The first positive coping strategy identified as central to enhancing resilience to strain is *emotional regulation*, referring to the processes by which an individual limits negative emotions and their impact by monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions. There was some evidence that mentors engaged emotional regulation. Shirley described an incident when she acknowledged her mentee's anger and then provided an alternate perspective:

> We had talked about her scenario with her mom and she said, 'I get mad when you talk about my mom.' And we talked it through. It's just through talking to her but letting her know that what she feels is ok, but there might be a better way. So I acknowledge her anger. Tell her it's ok for that, but I also want you to try and see it from this, you know, from this way, a different perspective.

In a similar fashion, Stein tried to guide his mentee to re-direct emotion:

> He knows mad, yelling – that's really all the stuff he knows . . . Whether it's him getting in trouble, you know, not focusing on the negative, but how we can fix it next time. This is what the outcome could be if he said nothing. So end it with a positive note.

Mentors also reported use of *conflict resolution*, a positive coping strategy characterized by two parties solving a problem by seeking a mutually beneficial outcome. Yuri reflected,

I feel like a lot of times, at-risk youth, they don't really think outside of their immediate situation. So like, if something bad happens to them, that's like the world. You know, if someone insults them, that shatters . . . that just really upsets them. Helping them realize that not everything that happens is a personal slate against you, and that you're not always going to get your way, and there's things to look forward to and things outside of the current issue that you're basing your life on.

"Chelsea" tried to help her mentee appreciate the diversity of backgrounds and opinions of others in ways that would lead to less conflict. She stated, "That was one of my main things, is to be open-minded, to not be judgmental, to not be prejudiced." Prior research suggests that building empathy can enhance conflict resolution skills and behavior (Deutsch, 1994). Cameron urged his mentee to understand this when it came to handling conflict situations:

I tried to tell him when I thought something could be done or seen differently. I just tried to give him a new perspective. Open his mind to new ways of thinking about his problems. When he thinks someone, like his teacher, doesn't do what they should, I ask him to think about it from more than his view. "What else might that teacher have going on? What might they be expecting from him or others that is not being done?" Then, hopefully, he won't be as upset and he can start to identify a way to resolve the issue.

Others more specifically pointed to consequences as a way of re-framing conflict for their mentees. When Jeff's mentee had school conflicts, he stated, "I've said, 'You know, those are choices you're going to be making, and some of the choices with respect to education are going to mean your life is going to be either more fulfilling or less fulfilling.' I try to give him what the implications are to him as a person." Stein responded to his mentee's fights with girls by illustrating some alternatives to conflict, stating, "When he was being mean to a female, you know, the conflict resolution was don't say anything at all. You're a bigger person, nothing would have happened, there would have been no consequences, you would have went on with your day." Shirley also highlighted consequences of negative responses to conflict:

We'd talk it through. So it's you know, what could you have done differently? Because sometimes she thinks that her way is the only way. There is no consequence to her actions. And I'm like, these are the rules. You can't just go around doing what you want. You're thirteen or whatever, you know. There are consequences.

Unfortunately, Mr. Nice Guy, a MM mentor, modeled a destructive approach to conflict. He recalled one discussion with his mentee about fighting: "He saw someone hit his little brother . . . See that's where I . . . because if somebody hit my brother, it would be over. But that's me. And I know you can't say that as a mentor. I think I did though." This response suggests that the training session did little to (re)direct his use of the strategy.

Many mentors engaged *future orientation*, a positive coping strategy that invokes expectations, hopes, and fears about the future, as well as active efforts to set and attain goals. In response to her mentee's academic stress, Shirley encouraged her to connect school performance with future dreams. She stated, "She wants to be a lawyer . . . And I said, 'Honey, if you want to be a lawyer, you have to be able to read.'" Mentors also activated this strategy more generally, demonstrating hope for the future and paths to get there. Yuri used his own background as an example with his mentee:

> He was the one who brought it up to me first about colleges. And then I told him what I did with accounting and all that. Just by doing well in elementary school transcended to middle school, and that would go to high school, and that's how you get into different colleges and get scholarships, grants, et cetera. And that is where he was at right now, it was good to really start caring.

Helping at-risk youth make cognitive connections between the present and future develops competencies for imagining more positive selves and altering behavior accordingly (Oyserman et al., 2002). Ms. Jones noted, "I was encouraging for her. She said that she likes math and that she wants to go into accounting or bookkeeping so I encouraged her to do that if she feels like that is a strong asset for her. And telling her that her studying now is going to make a big difference for her in the future." Amanda and John made similar statements to their mentees, typically emphasizing education. Amanda told her mentee, "'You get your education, you can do anything you want in the world.' So she knows that that is a priority."

Some mentors afforded explicit attention to goal-setting for youth. Chelsea differentiated between short-term and long-term goals and laid out a path for her mentee: "First, work hard in what you do, like doing all your homework, doing well. And then getting involved in the community, talking to teachers if you have a problem, and then going to high school and getting involved in high school, and then going to college." Jeff set weekly goals for his mentee to anticipate the upcoming week and accomplish small tasks before their next session. Marie purchased a book for her mentee about setting good habits, stating, "I said, 'Well, let's pick out some of your favorite habits.' Having her pick out two things she thought she could apply in the near future and that we looked at with the end in mind. You know: what you've got to do, what you have to do to get there." Others also emphasized planning ahead. Jake said, "If he wants to, I don't know, do the karate class, then he really needs to think about what he needs to do to get there. Making sure he writes down what his homework is and that kind of thing, talk to the teacher who may have given him a bad grade, that's important."

Finally, mentors utilized the coping strategy of *active listening*, which encompasses a variety of techniques including watching the speaker and making eye contact, providing feedback, and being emotionally and intellectually involved in the exchange (Jones, 2011; Robertson, 2005). Mentors modeled this strategy as they built their mentoring relationships. Yuri related his own life as one active listening technique in response to his mentee. He stated, "He would get on a rant about a pet or what not, I would try to ask about it more, try to relate to him my childhood growing up with animals, things like that. When he talked about school, I'd relate what I was doing." Shirley was attentive to her mentee's nonverbal demeanor. She stated,

If you're truly actively listening and actively participating, then you get to know if a child's having a bad day or a good day . . . Their whole demeanor, they might be more tired. She would, if she didn't have breakfast by the time I saw her, she just wasn't . . . not here, not present.

Likewise, Jake said,

And you have to be able to really listen well to what they're saying to understand what they are actually saying. You have to read the body language, you have to combine several conversations and examine the behavior of those conversations and how they react to a specific topic. And if you don't, you might miss something important.

Stein tried to teach his mentee to use active listening techniques during times of stress. He reported, "I would make him look at me when he was talking, especially when he was in trouble. If he would be looking the other way, I would pretend like I didn't hear him and make him repeat it when he was looking at me."

Perceived Effects of Positive Coping Strategies

Did the mentors' responses to mentees' strain, particularly by modeling or encouraging positive coping strategies, enhance the relationship? Some mentors identified ways that positive coping strategies facilitated closeness and bonding with their mentees. Most frequently mentioned by mentors were the beneficial effects of active listening. By demonstrating active listening, mentors believed they facilitated the mentee's confidence. Some, like Ms. Jones and Mr. Nice Guy, felt they filled a gap vacated by others in the youths' lives. Ms. Jones stated, "I think in some situations that have to do with a lot of their problems, that people don't listen to them or maybe don't pay attention to what they say or what their thoughts are or opinions of things." She thought active listening helped her mentee get a "little more detailed and talk more openly." Others had similar experiences. Stein found that active listening resulted in more conversation initiated by his mentee:

I always gave him my undivided attention, and made sure we had eye-level. I mean just the open-ended question whenever I started with everything at the beginning to create the relationship and kind of get a feel . . . Open ended questions just allow other things to come about versus yes or no answers. Then he started. I didn't have to ask because he would just bring it to the table.

Likewise, Cameron reported,

It seemed like asking questions was key to getting conversations going at first. I tried to ask about things that I remembered doing when I was in school. 'Are you playing sports? What are you learning that is cool? What are you learning that seems pointless?' Over time, he got used to the back and forth and would initiate conversations on his own.

Mentors also witnessed mentees incorporate positive coping during mentoring sessions, suggesting that the mentees' resilience was being fortified in real time. For example, Marie found that engaging the strategy of future orientation during mentoring sessions extended her mentee's vision: "It's like she's even seeing . . . we're talking about events a little further out." Stein felt that his mentee increasingly applied his newfound ability to regulate his emotions as they talked about upsetting events, appearing less reactive and more reflective. He stated,

> He may have had his feelings hurt at some of the things but I think ending it on a positive note really opened his eyes. Not everything is going to be good, but he focused…you know, he would get upset when he felt people were picking on him, and when you turned it around and you know, 'how do you think they feel?' and really opening emotions of others as well, he would kind of get quiet and start thinking.

Mentors reported that mentees' exposure to the positive coping strategies during the mentoring relationship often improved their resilience to stressful life events outside the relationship. This was particularly evident when the future orientation strategy intersected with academic performance, impacting several mentees' attitudes towards school. For example, Stein noted, "Oh, he's excited, he's excited. Good attitude, you know. He knows he'll get a reward, but it's a balance." Evidence of academic confidence mounted over time. Yuri stated, "He would always just come tell me what he got on the test or how he was doing. He seemed to take pride that he was doing better and wanted me to know when he was doing better." Cameron also noted, "His grades are up. His referrals have stopped . . . I am confident he has retained some of what we have discussed."

The Significance of Active Listening

Importantly, interviewees perceived their exercise of active listening as the foundation to a strong mentoring relationship, corroborating existing research like that of Converse & Lignugaris (2008). As Jake asserted,

> To have a relationship with anybody, it's important to listen and give feedback. The more I understand what he's saying the better I can help him with it. Listening is what we're here for, you know? I'm looking for information from him, and he's a kid, he's not just going to be able to list, he's not a robot, he's not going to list off . . . you have to be able to find information, you have to ask the right questions, and you have to listen to the answers, and find what you can help with within what he says.

This was echoed by Marie, who felt that listening built trust:

> Well, [listening] builds a rapport, it's almost an expectation. We're going to sit down, we're going to talk about how our week's been. You're really building a relationship. If the student doesn't feel comfortable with you and doesn't trust you, it's not going to proceed beyond that. So first, there has to be a comfort level, a level of trust, and sort of commonality.

Mentors also believed that employing active listening during mentoring sessions primed the environment for other coping strategies. Thus, active listening served overlapping foundational purposes, as the basis for a solid relationship and as the groundwork for other strategic responses to mentees. For example, Shirley described trying to defuse her mentee's negative feelings by helping her regulate emotions but, by actively listening, she soon realized that her mentee was not receptive.

> There are some times when she . . . you can tell by her body language, like it's escalating. It's too much for her. So I'll say to her, 'Ok, we're going to move on. Let's talk about something else.' And I'm able to veer it. And that's good. But then the next time we meet, she's not afraid to talk to me about it. A lot of times she'll be the one that brings it up.

Shirley moved the conversation to safer ground for the time being; this secured her mentee's confidence in initiating the topic later, at which time Shirley could incorporate emotional regulation. Yuri stated directly that other positive coping strategies would not be effective without active listening on the part of the mentors:

> With at-risk [youth] I think active listening [is most effective] because active listening kind of both gives and takes from the other strategies. I feel like they are more of a cycle than an individual process. They all feed off each other. You can't be future-oriented with a person if you don't know what they plan for their future and like they don't have a relationship with you, which I feel like you build through active listening. And it's hard to get people to open up about their problems for conflict resolution type situations if you don't listen to them, or they feel like you're not listening to them.

The inability to initially engage active listening also substantiated this point. For example, Mr. Nice Guy felt that knowing his mentee's grades before establishing a strong relationship misguided his approach. He stated,

> I think I saw his grades too early. Because I saw his grades on the first day, without truly knowing the kid. And that was a mistake. I never really got to the 'why' because I was already in, 'Ok, we got to do this, this, and this.'

Similarly, Shirley stated, "Know who your child is first, because otherwise, how are you going to set anything real? You don't know what you're setting, right? You can't set her a goal." These responses suggest that as active listening sets the foundation for a strong mentoring relationship, it also anchors effective incorporation of other positive coping strategies in response to strain in the lives of mentees.

Discussion

Mentoring is a popular and frequently employed intervention strategy for at-risk youth. Yet the tendency of research to focus more on developmental outcomes than on the mentoring relationship itself has led to the "scant attention to how mentoring

relationships work" (Spencer, 2007, p. 289). Further, lack of empirical data about which specific attributes of mentoring contribute to successful outcomes for youth may hinder program design and implementation. In this study, we add to existing understandings about mentoring relationships by using in-depth interviews to explore the perceptions of mentors in a SBM program serving at-risk youth. Specifically, we examined how mentors identified and described strain in the lives of their mentees and then responded to it during sessions. For at-risk youth, strain is theorized to result from detrimental or disadvantaged life events and conditions, such as unstable or chaotic family/home life, disadvantaged neighborhoods, violence, abuse, poverty, lack of resources, and academic or social deficits (Agnew, 1992). These variables were commonplace in these mentors' descriptions of their mentees. Once identified as problems, mentors attempted to help their mentees address or alleviate them to the extent possible during mentoring sessions.

The techniques engaged by the mentors in response to mentee strain were of particular interest. We examined how these coincided with four positive coping strategies found to enhance resilience to strain: emotional regulation, conflict resolution, future orientation, and active listening. Coping literature has demonstrated that adolescents can be taught to utilize positive coping techniques to reduce the impact of negative stressors (Izard et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 1997; Oyserman et al., 2002). However, there is very little existing research about how mentors identify and respond to strain in the lives of their mentees, or the techniques utilized when doing so. This research attempted to address this important knowledge gap by tying the extant literature related to strain and coping with that which examines the dynamics of mentoring.

Whether or not they specified the strategy by name, mentors from both schools identified techniques that corresponded to the positive coping strategies as useful within this type of mentoring relationship. In considering mentors' perceptions, it would be helpful to know more about how the school setting impacts the application and value of such strategies. For instance, in this study, mentors reflected extensively on academic goals and performance when discussing the future orientation coping strategy. Certainly, the fact that this mentoring program is school-based may impose a greater focus on academics than do community-based programs. And as Pryce and Keller (2013) point out, the school setting tends to circumscribe contact, activities, and even duration of mentoring relationships, all of which point to the potential for differences in how mentors in school-based versus community programs identify and respond to mentees' strain.

While all of the mentors acknowledged at least one of the identified coping strategies as important within their descriptions, JJ mentors made very few references to the concepts under emotional regulation when compared to the three other identified strategies. This raises intriguing questions. For instance, it may suggest that while successful mentors naturally default to approaches that align with the positive coping strategies discussed, emotional regulation is the least "intuitive" of the four strategies or the most dependent on training or experience. Active listening, on the other hand, proliferated among mentors and was perceived as foundational, not only in terms of solidifying the mentoring relationship itself, but also as a starting point from which other coping strategies evolved. Active listening may certainly overlap with the relational processes found to be successful in other qualitative studies of mentoring, such as empathy (Spencer, 2006) and high emotional attunement (Pryce, 2012). This study furthers the understanding of active listening, in that it emerged as central to facilitating other coping strategies in the mentoring relationship. At the same time, it is

important to consider that this study focused on the first 3 months of mentoring. As such, relationship-building is more of a focus among mentors than it would be in established, long-term relationships. Consequently, it is possible that study timing contributes to the mentors' emphasis on active listening.

It remains an open question as to whether most mentors bring positive coping strategies to their relationship with at-risk youth simply by virtue of their self-selection in volunteering for such service. Perhaps those who volunteer as mentors, knowing it involves building a relationship with an at-risk adolescent, attach to their efforts natural skills consistent with the positive coping strategies enumerated herein. While we cannot make such determinations in this study, it is clear that active listening was perceived by mentors as integral to the building of relationships with mentees while also facilitating engagement of other positive coping strategies. These perceptions inform the possibilities for intervention programs that train new mentors in school-based programs as we work towards the goal of enhancing resilience among at-risk youth.

Limitations

The goal of this qualitative research was to provide exploratory and rich data rather than generalizable conclusions. Information obtained in the interviews is indicative of mentors at these particular schools in Scholastic Mentors over a limited timeframe; as a result, our findings do not necessarily apply to the entire population of at-risk mentees or mentors. Also, the mentors' varied identities, backgrounds, and experiences could have affected the mentoring relationships and perceptions. The interviewing author is reflexive about his positionality as a white middle-class male, realizing this too could have affected the interviews or their interpretation. Though it is beyond the scope of our study to draw conclusions about these effects, we remain cognizant of their potential roles. Future research should also consider utilizing qualitative interviewing or observational techniques to further disentangle the factors contributing to strong mentoring relationships that enhance resiliency among at-risk youth and lead to improved behavioral outcomes.

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