The Stages and Development of Mentoring Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

The defining feature of youth mentoring is the personal relationship established between a young person and a caring, competent individual who offers companionship, support, and guidance. Conceptual models proposing how individuals might benefit from mentoring necessarily begin with the assumption that some type of relationship exists between the youth and mentor (Rhodes, 2002). Nevertheless, the development of the mentoring relationship itself rarely has been the object of study. A better understanding of the processes involved in the formation, maintenance, and conclusion of mentoring relationships holds promise for more effective intervention. With knowledge of the typical course in mentoring relationships, programs could anticipate challenges and provide supportive services at crucial junctures in the relationship. Promoting the sustained development of positive relationships is a primary goal because longer-lasting relationships tend to yield greater benefits for youth, while short-term relationships may have unintended negative consequences (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

Every mentoring relationship has a life of its own, and the aim of this chapter is to examine the natural progression of these relationships over time. Like individual lives, relationships have beginnings, follow diverse trajectories, and ultimately reach their endings (Hinde, 1997). As in research on development over the life span, the study of mentoring relationships requires attention to normative patterns in development, individual differences in development, and variability or flexibility within a single relationship (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998). Accordingly, the chapter begins by highlighting theoretical perspectives on the development of relationships by addressing three fundamental questions: What features of relationships are subject to change? How do relationships change? Why do relationships change? Next, a heuristic model proposing normative phases in the development of youth mentoring relationships is presented. Then, this stage model is used to organize both a review of empirical research on the development of mentoring...
relationships and a discussion of program practices that may foster relationship development. The chapter concludes with a discussion of future directions for research and practice.

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**Theoretical Framework: What Features of Relationships Are Subject to Change?**

A concept of close relationships is prerequisite for examining what changes over the course of their development. Any definition or description of human relationships must necessarily be incomplete given their inherent complexity and the variability they demonstrate across time and contexts (Hinde, 1997). Nevertheless, a few core principles provide a basis for understanding the features of significant relationships. A close relationship involves a pattern of social interaction over an extended time in which each individual influences the subsequent behavior of the other individual (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Participants exchange information, express emotions, negotiate goals, and regulate their own behavior and that of the other person. To distinguish relationships from a series of casual or routine contacts, meanings must be attributed to these interdependent, enduring, and reciprocal interactions (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Experiences with the other person are interpreted and organized into mental representations of the particular thoughts, emotions, and actions that characterize the relationship (Hartup, 1989). Expectations derived from the interactive history of the relationship affect current exchanges, and current exchanges, in turn, influence future relations (Reis et al., 2000).

Despite sharing some core features, relationships come in many varieties. The relationships of children and adolescents may be distinguished by the type of interactive partner, such as parent, teacher, coach, neighbor, counselor, or friend (Blyth, Hill, & Thiel, 1982). Likewise, relationships may be differentiated by their main functions, such as protection, nurturance, play, education, and emotional support. Function and partner often have a specific correspondence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). For example, attachment behaviors are activated in times of distress to elicit protection and comfort from a parent or caregiver, whereas affiliative behaviors operate in the presence of peers to promote social engagement and friendship (Cassidy, 1999).

Relationships also may be contrasted on dimensions such as permanence (e.g., voluntary, kinship, committed), social power (e.g., resources, experience, rank), and gender (e.g., gender roles, same- vs. opposite-sex pairs) (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). In parent-child relationships, the obligations of kinship promote permanence, and the greater capacities of the parent create a power differential. The emphasis is on maintaining the relationship despite unequal exchanges in which resources generally flow from parent to child. In peer friendships, which are voluntary and potentially temporary, the emphasis is on an egalitarian reciprocity in which each individual benefits from continuing the relationship. The parent-child relationship is a prototypic *vertical* relationship, while friendship is a prototypic *horizontal* relationship (Hartup, 1989).

Given these distinctions, how should mentoring relationships be conceptualized? Various types of mentoring may differ in permanence (e.g., natural mentors vs. mentors with program obligations) and social power (e.g., older and wiser mentors vs. peer mentors). Mentoring programs may promote particular roles (e.g., friend or coach) and corresponding functions (e.g., fun or education). In many instances, the mentor is more experienced and capable than the mentee, but the mentor is encouraged to act like a friend to the mentee. Thus, mentoring may represent a hybrid relationship, incorporating features of both vertical and horizontal models. A potential advantage of mentoring is that the mentor need not be constrained to a particular role and may respond as appropriate in several different domains of the child’s life. Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) observe: “A mentor might act as a tutor one day (helping with math homework), a sponsor the next day (helping to find a job), and a confidant the third day (offering emotional support following a family crisis)” (p. 546).

Even relationships that fall into the same category according to form and function may
vary in the nature and quality of interpersonal interaction that characterizes the dyad. For example, relationships might be assessed on a number of dimensions: content and diversity of activities; qualities of verbal and nonverbal communication; frequency and pattern of interaction; nature and degree of conflict; use of power and control; amount and significance of self-disclosure; level of satisfaction; and strength of commitment (Hinde, 1997). With regard to youth mentoring relationships, some authors have pointed to the importance of factors such as trust, satisfaction, disappointment, and coping assistance (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, in press). Others have emphasized attributes such as empathy, engagement, authenticity, and empowerment (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002). In summary, over time, mentoring relationships may exhibit change and development on several aspects of form, function, and mode of interaction.

How Do Relationships Change?

Just as there are many aspects of a relationship subject to change with the passage of time, there are many ways in which change in relationships may occur. Despite consistencies in behavior and meaning over time, relationships are multidetermined and dynamic (Hinde, 1997). Thus, a major challenge is accounting simultaneously for relationship continuities and discontinuities (Collins, 1997). Applying concepts from general systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997), interactions between individuals in a relationship must have pattern and structure (e.g., rules, codes) for the relationship to survive. On one hand, relationships have self-stabilizing, homeostatic features that compensate for changing conditions in the environment. On the other hand, change and evolution are inherent in open, living systems. Challenges to existing patterns can result in reorganization of the system, frequently in a more complex and differentiated form.

Over an extended time, these developmental phenomena define the life course of a relationship, with adjustments to changing circumstances and significant events altering its developmental pathway. Because mentoring responds to the individualized needs and circumstances of youth, every relationship follows a distinctive trajectory marked by turning points, transitions, and transformations. Reflecting the complexity of developmental pathways, Sroufe (1997) outlines five propositions:

1. Adaptation to current challenges forecasts the capacity to adapt to future challenges.
2. Change is possible at many points in time.
3. Change is constrained by prior adaptation as patterns of behavior solidify with time.
4. Multiple pathways can lead to similar outcomes (equifinality).
5. Similar initial pathways can lead to different outcomes (multifinality).

In the context of a mentoring relationship, the resolution of each ambiguous situation, whether deciding on an outing or dealing with a family crisis, provides a point of reference for how the relationship will cope when faced with similar conditions in the future. In addition, the accumulation of shared experiences generates routines—what they do, what they say, how they say it—that give the relationship form, familiarity, and substance. Inevitably, however, the mentor and youth negotiate new and different circumstances that require ingenuity and flexibility. These moments present possibilities for the developmental pathway of the relationship to be deflected. At such times, the adaptive capacity and sustainability of the relationship may depend not only on the behaviors of the mentor and youth but also on contextual factors. In formal mentoring programs, for example, these factors may include the structural components of the program (e.g., policies, guidelines) as well as the support and corrective action of parents and program staff (Keller, in press). Given the particular combination of personal and situational factors, some mentoring relationships may develop quickly into a strong bond; some may experience a series of setbacks and breakthroughs; and others may struggle along without being able to establish a meaningful connection.

A relationship’s trajectory may be revealed by tracing particular dimensions of the relationship. Taking self-disclosure as an example,
the course of development might be charted according to changes in frequency, in variety of topics addressed, in nature or significance of revelations, and in reciprocity of exchanges (cf. Hays, 1985). A relationship characteristic measured on a continuum may not change (e.g., constant function), may show steady growth or decline (e.g., monotonic function), may fluctuate up and down (e.g., cyclical function), or may demonstrate sudden, dramatic shifts (e.g., step function). Alternatively, change may occur as a qualitative transition or transformation from one mode of functioning to another.

Changes in relationships also need to be analyzed with regard to distinctions between behavior and meaning. The outward nature of interactions in the relationship might change although a coherence of function is maintained over time (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). For example, Hartup and Stevens (1997) propose a distinction in relationships between deep structure, the fundamental and stable qualities defining the essence of the relationship, and surface structure, the actual content of social exchange that changes with age and circumstance. Applied to youth mentoring relationships, the mentor may remain a consistent companion and role model despite evolution of the specific activities and conversations in which the mentor and youth participate.

Why Do Relationships Change?

Change in relationships may occur for at least three reasons. First, relationship processes are influenced by the individual development of members of the dyad. The course of a mentoring relationship will be inextricably linked with the child’s biological, cognitive, and social development (Hartup, 1989; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). As contexts for development, relationships foster children’s psychosocial growth and teach important lessons about social interaction (Hartup & Laursen, 1999). In turn, relationships evolve as children expand their capabilities as interactive partners and exhibit advances in their understanding of the world, their complex reasoning, their social skills, their level of responsibility, and their competencies in other domains (Collins & Repinski, 1994). Interpersonal adaptations to individual development also can be spurred by milestones like moving from one level of schooling to the next, the onset of puberty, and the initiation of dating (Collins, 1997). Although perhaps not as rapid or obvious, the maturation of the mentor also may prompt changes in the dynamics of the relationship.

Second, interpersonal exchanges within the dyad may be a source of change and development in relationships. For example, in the context of mentoring, self-disclosure may be both an indicator of the depth of the relationship and also a part of the process that either strengthens or weakens the relationship. The management of conflict also may influence the course of the relationship. Conflict resolved in a constructive and nonthreatening manner can promote growth and understanding that strengthens the relationship, whereas conflict perceived as hostile can lead to defensiveness and intransigence with negative consequences (Collins & Laursen, 1992). Similarly, other strains and ruptures in the relationship can weaken the bond or provide opportunities for the mentor and youth to learn to address matters directly, explore their emotional content, and validate self-assertion within the relationship (cf. Safran, Muran, & Samstag, 1994). Thus, many interactive episodes can represent critical junctures that determine whether a mentoring relationship is maintained, strengthened, or damaged.

Finally, like all relationships, mentoring relationships may change and develop in response to events and circumstances in the lives of the participants. For example, the ease of maintaining contact may increase or decrease as a result of residential moves or changes in jobs or schools. Likewise, the relationship may be altered if either partner experiences an accident, illness, or other significant life event. The effect of such events on the mentoring relationship may depend on several factors, such as whether the mentor and youth can anticipate them and prepare for adjustments. Another factor in the context of formal mentoring programs is assistance provided by program professionals in negotiating the implications of the changes for the relationship.

Organizing Framework for Stages of Mentoring Relationships

Although the development of relationships is clearly complex and highly variable, they do
progress through a temporal sequence that generally includes a beginning, middle, and end. A heuristic model that divides mentoring relationships into chronological stages thus may aid in the understanding of both normative processes and individual differences in their development. Although awareness of continual fluctuations in relationships instills caution about such models, distinguishing different phases in mentoring relationships provides a coherent organizing framework. The model suggested in this chapter is based on Hinde’s (1997) discussion of the periods of change in the course of a relationship and Fehr’s (2000) overview of the life cycle of friendship. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that the proposed stages share similarities with those in Kram’s (1983) stage-based model for natural mentoring relationships that arise between adults in the workplace to foster career development. The model presented here and summarized in Table 6.1 covers five potential periods in the developmental course of mentoring relationships: contemplation, initiation, growth and maintenance, decline and dissolution, and redefinition.

Although relationships may be marked by defining moments, such as the initial meeting or the final good-bye, the model is not meant to imply that mentoring relationships pass through clearly demarcated stages. Nor is it suggested that the timing and sequence of the stages necessarily follow a universal or invariant progression. Furthermore, although the model focuses on the interpersonal behaviors of mentor and youth due to space constraints, it should be recognized that mentoring is embedded within a network of other relationships, a physical setting, and cultural and societal contexts. Transactions with these different levels of environmental organization may profoundly influence the relationship processes described in the model.

**Contemplation**

Depending on the type of mentoring, there may be a period of anticipation and preparation before the relationship actually commences. In contrast to voluntary friendships or romances that begin spontaneously, many relationships

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involve a preceding obligation or commitment, as with parents expecting a baby or teachers beginning with new students. The contemplation phase would be applicable to program mentoring, where individuals choose to participate in a new relationship and have preconceived ideas about what it will entail. Natural mentoring relationships also may be established with intentionality and forethought, or they may evolve into significant relationships without much attention to the goal of mentoring.

Salient processes in the contemplation phase would include obtaining information about mentoring, planning for future activities, and forming expectations about the relationship. These preparations may be influenced by the motivations, attitudes, values, goals, and needs that lead each person to enter a mentoring relationship. In the case of formal mentoring, expectations may be shaped by stated goals and guidelines and the training practices of the program. The contemplation phase sets the stage for initial behavior in the relationship.

Initiation

The initiation phase involves the process of becoming acquainted. In a new relationship, the mentor and youth are likely to be motivated to learn about each other. They each may assess what the other partner brings to the relationship, monitor how their behavior affects the other, make comparisons against their expectations for the relationship, and evaluate their potential together (Hinde, 1997). In addition, the mentor and youth may exchange views and determine their similarity and compatibility in multiple domains, such as interests, attitudes, and activity preferences. Working to the advantage of a new mentoring relationship is the fact that individuals are more likely to have an initial positive response and engage in reciprocal sharing when they perceive that the other person is inclined to have a relationship with them and when they expect ongoing contact with the other person (Fehr, 2000).

Growth and Maintenance

The growth and maintenance phase can encompass almost the full duration of the mentoring relationship. Growth can be viewed as a reduction of uncertainty about the existence of the relationship and an increase in agreement about the nature of the relationship (Duck, 1995). In co-constructing the relationship over time, the mentor and youth may establish idiosyncratic patterns of communication, conventions for turn-taking, and routines of behavior. They negotiate understandings on a range of issues, including what topics will be excluded from conversation, what types of support will be provided, and how conflict will be managed (Hinde, 1997). Self-disclosure may increase in breadth and depth. A growing sense of predictability, reliability, and familiarity may foster trust and encourage commitment to continuing the relationship. The relationship may be maintained both implicitly through the everyday activities that make up the relationship (e.g., conversation, dining together) and explicitly through behaviors expressing the importance of the relationship (e.g., affection, discussing the relationship itself, cards, and gifts) (Duck, 1994). Providing social and emotional support may be another important factor in maintaining the mentoring relationship. In addition, the growth and maintenance of the relationship may be enhanced by simple experiences of fun and enjoyment together. Joking, laughter, informal language, and relaxed attitude are associated with relationship satisfaction and closeness in other types of relationships (Planalp & Benson, 1992).

Decline and Dissolution

Decline refers to a reduction in the importance or level of closeness in the mentoring relationship, whereas dissolution indicates the termination of the relationship. Dissolution may or may not be recognized, negotiated, or acknowledged. It may be punctuated by a clear event ending the relationship, or the mentor and youth may passively “drift apart” until the relationship is over by default. Relationship decline and dissolution may result if the maintenance activities outlined above are neglected or prove unsuccessful. Relationships also may deteriorate due to conflict, betrayal, or the discovery of unattractive personal characteristics in the partner (Fehr, 2000). Alternatively, mentoring may
have accomplished its purpose or outlived its usefulness as the needs, expectations, interests, and life circumstances of the participants change (Hinde, 1997). Situational factors also may be influential, especially those that diminish opportunities for contact between mentor and youth (e.g., residential moves, work or school commitments). Finally, many mentoring programs, particularly those operating during a school year, designate an expected duration for matches. Anticipated match endings naturally follow a different course than those disrupted by relationship difficulties or life events.

Redefinition

A mentoring relationship in decline may not always be destined for complete or permanent dissolution. One alternative may be an agreement to have the relationship continue in an altered form, with expectations regarding the amount of contact and the nature of interactions redefined to fit new circumstances. Another possibility is that a broken relationship can be restored or rejuvenated by an apology, a change in problematic behavior, or a talk to resolve differences or set new ground rules (Wilmot, 1994). Also, relationships that “fade away” passively often leave open the possibility of being resumed sometime in the future (Fehr, 2000). Even if the mentoring relationship is known to be over, the mentor or youth may reflect on and reinterpret experiences in the relationship. This process may provide new insights, reveal new lessons, and reinforce the influence of the relationship on the person’s life. Because the benefits of mentoring may become apparent only years later, the protégé may wish to express appreciation long after the match. Similarly, the mentor’s curiosity about what has become of the youth may motivate a renewal of the relationship after many years.

RESEARCH

Very little research traces the developmental course of youth mentoring relationships. A few studies have generated descriptions of stages in relationship development for informal mentoring between adults in the workplace (Pollock, 1995). Although nothing directly comparable is found in the literature on youth mentoring, several studies report findings relevant to considering different stages of development in youth mentoring relationships. The following review of this research is organized according to the five phases of relationship development outlined above.

Contemplation

Findings from several studies are consistent with the view that mentor expectations and motivations play a role in the development of relationships in formal programs. In a path model using prospective data from Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) matches, Parra and colleagues (Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002) found that mentor-perceived self-efficacy at the beginning of the match was associated with greater mentor-youth contact, greater involvement in program-relevant activities, and fewer mentor-reported obstacles to relationship development. These factors were associated, in turn, with higher ratings of relationship closeness and with relationships of longer duration. With regard to factors important in the contemplation phase, mentor-perceived self-efficacy was associated positively with mentor ratings of the quality of training received prior to matching. Similarly, in a cross-sectional survey of 669 school- and community-based mentors, greater participation in prematch orientation and training was associated with closer and more supportive relationships, and analyses suggested a mediating process: Mentors reporting more training also reported spending more time with their mentees and engaging in more social activities with them (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000).

Research employing in-depth qualitative interviews to learn the experiences of mentors and youth provides further insights about the significance of the contemplation phase. Examining 26 relationships in a program matching elders with at-risk youth, Styles and Morrow (1992) classified satisfied and dissatisfied pairs according to feelings of liking and attachment, indications of appreciation and support, and commitment to continuing the relationship. Mentors in satisfied matches expected from
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the outset that the relationship would be one-directional: focused on benefits for the youth. These mentors were realistic about changes that might result from the match, and they considered even slow progress in forming the relationship an accomplishment. In comparison, mentors who began matches expecting to transform their protégés and to receive recognition for their efforts were typically disappointed.

In a similar study on relationship formation with a sample of 82 BBBS matches, Morrow and Styles (1995) again identified two major types of relationships with different patterns of interaction, which they labeled developmental and prescriptive. The prescriptive classification, however, had two subcategories, as described below. Mentors in each type of relationship commenced their matches with distinctly different expectations regarding the needs of the youth, the goals of the match, and their purpose as a mentor. Mentors in developmental relationships (n = 54) more often conceived of their role as a friend to the youth. These mentors believed they should meet the needs of the youth by being flexible and supportive, incorporating the youth’s preferences, and building a solid relationship. In contrast, mentors in the larger subcategory of prescriptive relationships (n = 17) typically viewed their role as being an authority figure, with some responsibility for regulating the youth’s behavior. These mentors initiated their matches with goals for transforming the youth and began their attempts to address difficulties in the youth’s life early in the relationship. In the smaller subcategory of prescriptive matches (n = 11), the mentors expected that their protégés, despite their young age and inexperience in friendships with adults, would take an equal responsibility for maintaining the relationship by initiating contacts and planning activities. Compared with prescriptive matches, developmental matches tended to last longer and were more likely to be described in positive terms by both mentors and youth. Morrow and Styles (1995) interpreted their findings as emphasizing the importance of the mentor’s initial approach to the program: “The attitudes, expectations, and styles of the volunteers were the most salient factors in determining how, and into what types, relationships evolved” (p. 19).

Reporting on a university-initiated mentoring program, Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) also noted a connection between mentors’ understanding of their purposes and the nature of their relationships with protégés. Mentors were classified into four levels based on comments about their aims for their matches: Level 1 mentors focused primarily on developing a relationship; Level 2 mentors spoke of introducing opportunities; Level 3 mentors stressed developing character; and Level 4 mentors saw their task as developing the youth’s competence. Importantly, the four levels were hierarchical: Mentors at higher levels talked about the importance of lower-level purposes as well, but lower-level mentors did not mention higher-level purposes. Level 1 mentors were the least likely to persist in their matches, whereas the higher-level mentors spent more time with their protégés and had more functional relationships. These findings are discussed in relation to those of Morrow and Styles later in the chapter.

Information regarding the expectations and motivations of youth who enter mentoring relationships is sparse. Spencer (2002) conducted retrospective interviews with adolescents in strong mentoring relationships and reported that most had expected the mentoring program to be fun. Some had yearned for an adult who would give them individualized attention.

Initiation

Mentors in qualitative studies frequently note an initial period in the relationship, sometimes 6 months to a year in length, when youth are uncommunicative, are reluctant to trust, and may fail to keep appointments or return phone calls (Spencer, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1992). Mentors credit patience and perseverance during this time of testing with the eventual development of a solid relationship. Their accounts of relationship formation suggest the process of getting acquainted cannot be rushed (Morrow & Styles, 1995; Spencer, 2002). Mentors in satisfied relationships reported waiting for their protégés to decide whether and when to confide in them, assuming that time would be needed to establish trust in the relationship. Mentors who tried to develop their relationships by pressing youth to disclose personal information or to
discuss difficult issues in their lives typically were met with resistance (Styles & Morrow, 1992).

Recognizing shared interests was found to be an important factor associated with close and supportive relationships in the survey of school- and community-based mentors by Herrera et al. (2000). Likewise, teens in a workplace internship program who perceived greater similarity with their mentors in terms of views, values, and approaches to problems were more likely to indicate satisfaction with their relationships and report intentions to continue them (Ensher & Murphy, 1997). These findings from cross-sectional studies of existing relationships suggest that early identification of interpersonal similarity and compatibility may be associated with positive mentoring experiences, but prospective studies that examine how this process unfolds are lacking.

**Growth and Maintenance**

Frequent and consistent contact appears to be an important ingredient in the creation of strong mentoring relationships (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Herrera et al., 2000). Research findings also suggest the nature of activities mentors and youth do together may be significant in the growth and maintenance of relationships (DuBois et al., 2002; Morrow & Styles, 1995). DuBois et al. (2002), for example, reported that relationships in which youth consistently nominated their mentors as significant adults in their lives were distinguished by youth reports of greater frequency of contact, increasing discussion of the mentee’s personal relationships and of social issues (e.g., current events), and increasing participation in sports and athletic activities. Using survey data reported by mentors, Herrera et al. (2000) examined a regression model containing multiple demographic, program, and activity-related variables (including social, academic, and job-related activities) and discovered that engaging in social activities (e.g., hanging out, going to events, having lunch) was the factor most strongly associated with every indicator of relationship closeness used in the study. Reflecting these results and the theoretical proposition that fun and enjoyment are important in relationship growth and maintenance, Morrow and Styles (1995) found that youth in developmental relationships were more likely than those in prescriptive relationships to report that their mentors took them to places they really wanted to go (97% vs. 65% prescriptive) and proposed activities that were really fun (84% vs. 38% prescriptive).

In their research, Styles and Morrow (1992) also observed differences in the patterns of interaction described by participants in satisfied and dissatisfied matches. In satisfied matches, mentors appeared to follow a “youth-driven” approach, in which the mentor attempted to identify the needs and interests of the youth and address them in such a way that they would be receptive to help. In these matches, the mentor typically included the youth in determining both the activities they would do together and the areas in which the mentor would offer assistance. In a similar vein, Morrow and Styles (1995) noted that mentors in developmental relationships were more likely to include their protégés in making decisions about their time together and negotiating the selection of mutually enjoyable activities. When youth were initially slow to express their preferences, the mentors listened closely for indications of their interests and “learned through trial and error what the youth’s interests were by observing how they responded to various activities that the mentors chose” (Styles & Morrow, 1992, p. v). This process accords with the example of a Level 4 mentor described by Hamilton and Hamilton (1992). Because the youth to whom he was matched did not offer suggestions for outings, the mentor generated various ideas for activities that would teach new skills, provide new experiences and challenges, and inspire new pursuits for the youth. Throughout this process of experimentation, the mentor was devoted to learning more about the youth’s interests and identifying activities the youth would enjoy.

The findings of the studies by Styles and Morrow (Morrow & Styles, 1995; Styles & Morrow, 1992) are similar in their identification of other patterns of interaction that distinguished more successful from less successful relationships. Mentors in matches characterized as developmental were more likely to offer
consistent reassurance and kindness to their protégés, to respond to requests for help in a nonjudgmental manner, to offer suggestions and alternatives, to avoid criticizing and lecturing, and to employ practical, problem-solving approaches to address issues. In the beginning of these matches, the mentor typically emphasized establishing trust and building a strong foundation for the relationship so that the youth would develop confidence in the mentor as a reliable source of support in times of need (Morrow & Styles, 1995). As developmental relationships solidified, youth began to voluntarily disclose their difficulties at home or school, allowing the mentor to provide advice and guidance. Similarly, as developmental relationships strengthened, mentors started to address objectives beyond relationship building, such as helping the youth to improve in school or to become more responsible. According to Morrow and Styles, developmental mentors often expressed interest in influencing grades and youth behavior in contexts outside the match, but they balanced these aims with maintaining open, trusting, and supportive relationships.

It is noteworthy that both the mentors in developmental relationships described by Morrow and Styles (1995) and the Level 3 and 4 mentors featured in the research of Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) were similar in devoting attention to the dual goals of ensuring a solid relationship and developing competence and positive attributes in the youth to whom they were matched. Furthermore, both types of mentors approached these goals by attempting to discern the interests of their protégés and introducing learning opportunities built around those interests. However, consistent with theory suggesting there are multiple pathways to a positive mentoring experience, the two frameworks diverge somewhat in the relative primacy accorded to relationship-building and competence-building efforts in developing mentoring relationships. Based on their findings, Morrow and Styles (1995) proposed that a focus on youth-driven relationship building was an important precursor to youth transformation efforts. Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) concluded that challenging and rewarding activities with instrumental goals to enhance competence were an ideal vehicle for developing a warm interpersonal relationship.

Resolution of this debate may come with further investigation of possible moderating factors such as the structure and goals of the mentoring programs, the reasons youth seek a mentor, and the developmental age of the youth. For instance, Darling and colleagues (Darling, Hamilton, & Niego, 1994) noted older adolescents’ relationships with nonparental adults are more likely to revolve around instrumental support that helps them to learn specific skills and gain a sense of accomplishment. It is also possible, however, that the importance of sequence may be less than implied by the two perspectives. Relationship development and the promotion of youth competencies can occur simultaneously, and very likely one will reinforce the other. Furthermore, both perspectives seem compatible with a view that flexible and creative mentors can find opportunities throughout the relationship to promote youth development in activities that are enjoyable, challenging and engaging, and aligned with youth interests. The key, it seems, is for the mentor to find a balance between vertical and horizontal models of relationships by providing adult structure and scaffolding to support youth development while encouraging the youth’s voluntary continuation in the relationship.

Decline and Dissolution

Research by Grossman and Rhodes (2002) highlights the importance of examining the circumstances surrounding the decline and dissolution of mentoring relationships. Findings from their experimental evaluation of BBBS programs indicated that beneficial effects from program participation, assessed relative to a randomly assigned control group, were more clearly evident when the mentoring relationship lasted at least 12 months, whereas matches ending after a very short period (i.e., less than 3 months) could have detrimental effects. A recent national survey of mentoring programs found that 76% had a minimum time commitment over 6 months but only 15% had an expectation of more than 12 months (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2003). BBBS programs generally ask new participants to make a 1-year
commitment, although long-lasting relationships are the goal. A cross-sectional study of 821 existing BBBS matches from eight different programs found the average length to be 28 months, with the longest reporting 13 years together (Furano, Roaf, Styles, & Branch, 1993). Following 378 BBBS matches prospectively, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) observed that the risk of match termination each month was relatively low and stable (i.e., 2%-4% of matches) but peaked around the 1-year anniversary (about 10% of matches). Based on the average hazard rate, they projected an expected match length of approximately 17 months.

The study by Grossman and Rhodes (2002) also tested multiple youth and mentor characteristics for their association with relationship duration. Earlier termination was more likely for youth who were between the ages of 13 and 16, who had been referred for services with identified difficulties at home or school, or who had a history of abuse. Married mentors between the ages of 26 and 30 and mentors with lower incomes tended to have shorter matches. In addition, relationship termination was associated with youth reports that mentors did not take their interests into consideration and youth reports that they felt let down or disappointed by mentors.

Processes that appeared to increase the probability for the deterioration of mentoring relationships were identified in the qualitative studies discussed above. Among mentors focused primarily on building a relationship, Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) noted the potential for difficulties included (a) the mentor worrying whether the youth liked him or her, (b) the mentor worrying about selecting the right activities, (c) the mentor being disappointed if the youth did not share personal information after a few meetings, or (d) the mentor feeling inadequate as a counselor when the youth actually asked for advice on serious personal matters. Morrow and Styles (1995) described similar patterns for the subcategory of prescriptive relationships in which mentors expected an equal relationship. When youth did not initiate contact or show sufficient appreciation, the mentors often interpreted this as disinterest or laziness, and then the mentors became disappointed and failed to persevere in these relationships.

Morrow and Styles (1995) reported a different cycle of increasing frustration and disappointment that apparently contributed to the demise of relationships in the other prescriptive subcategory. As noted previously, mentors approached these relationships with predetermined agendas for transforming the youth in a relatively short period of time. From the outset, these mentors tended to set the goals, determine the pace, select the activities, and establish the ground rules for the relationship with little regard for the youth’s preferences or abilities. As depicted by Morrow and Styles (1995), for example, a common approach of a prescriptive volunteer was to point out the youth’s mistakes, state expectations for change, and express displeasure if they were not met. The relationship suffered as the youth resisted the mentor’s efforts to focus on problem areas in the child’s life, often by avoiding contact with the mentor and withdrawing from the relationship. Because prescriptive mentors were reluctant to adjust their high expectations and were disappointed in the failure of their protégés to respond, tensions and frustrations increased on both sides, and these matches were typically short-lived (Morrow & Styles, 1995; Styles & Morrow, 1992). To briefly summarize, mentors who adopted predominantly horizontal (e.g., equality) or predominantly vertical (e.g., authority) relationship models seemed to experience difficulties.

Redefinition

The research literature does not furnish information about how mentors and youth part ways when relationships end. Likewise, researchers have not followed former mentors and mentees past their program involvement, so what form their interaction might take at a later point in time is unknown. The possibility that participants, particularly youth, are better able to realize with the benefit of hindsight how a mentoring relationship affected them also remains unexplored.

Practice

The practice of mentoring occurs within the mentor-youth relationship as the mentor takes a
personal interest in the youth’s life and attempts to foster the youth’s development. The growth and maintenance of the relationship rests heavily on the wisdom, skill, and dedication of the mentor. However, as noted previously, a mentoring relationship exists within a social context, and thus other individuals may influence its developmental course. In a program setting, the mentoring intervention can be conceptualized as a coordinated system involving not only the child and mentor but also the parent and agency professional (Keller, in press). Interactions among mentor, child, parent, and professional staff are guided by program policies and procedures. The structure and function of program practices frequently correspond to the stages posited for the development of mentoring relationships, and the following discussion of relevant program practices is organized according to this model. The discussion draws from recent recommendations regarding “best practices” for mentoring disseminated in a set of guidelines from MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership and a series of technical assistance packets prepared by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) based on their research findings (Sipe, 1995). Illustrative examples are based on traditional BBBS community-based mentoring, which has a highly developed program infrastructure with national practice standards (Furano et al., 1993).

**Contemplation**

Program procedures for recruiting, screening, and training may provide opportunities to assess and to influence individual motivations, attitudes, and expectations as participants prepare to embark on new relationships. By addressing issues in the contemplation stage highlighted by theory and research, these practices ideally would establish mutual understanding about the purpose of the program, clarify the roles and responsibilities of each person involved in the match, and promote a sense of efficacy in facing the challenges of mentoring.

Recruitment materials may instill enduring impressions about the program as prospective participants learn about the recommended frequency of contact, the usual types of activities, and the objectives of the relationship. For example, recruitment messages typically indicate that youth in the program could benefit from the attentive support of a caring adult as they face the challenges of growing up. These initial communications should aim to avoid the perception common among prescriptive mentors that they need to take responsibility for a youth’s academic success or rescue a troubled youth from a life of disadvantage.

Screening practices based on specific eligibility criteria can determine the skills, resources, and needs that participants bring to the match. Drawing on theory and research presented above, intensive screening of potential mentors could enhance the prospects for positive relationship development by attempting to identify mentors who demonstrate adaptability and flexibility in interpersonal situations, who express understanding of the developmental needs of youth, who appreciate the role of fun and social activities in relationships, and who are amenable to feedback and cooperative decision making. Given the research of Morrow and Styles (1995) and Hamilton and Hamilton (1992), for example, it may be important to discourage volunteers who pursue mentoring primarily as means to make a new friendship and who desire mutual exchange and equal reciprocity as signs that they are liked and valued.

As noted previously, training prior to matching is associated with positive indicators of relationship development. Prematch training provides opportunities to communicate program guidelines and expectations, to prepare participants for situations that may arise, and to teach skills for facilitating relationship development. Based on available evidence, trainings should advise that relationship development is enhanced when mentors elicit youth interests and preferences, include them in making decisions, offer them consistent and sensitive support, and engage in enjoyable activities that promote competence and provide a sense of accomplishment. Above all, it may be important to help mentors understand their dual role, balancing the responsibility of vertical relationships with the mutuality of horizontal relationships.

In practice, and in the literature, screening and training tends to focus on mentors rather than youth or parents. Nevertheless, knowledge of the child’s history, needs, interests, and
family circumstances seems highly relevant for making a suitable match and providing appropriate program support. In addition, child and parent training like that for mentors—discussing roles and responsibilities and practicing communication skills—would likely foster the development of the mentoring relationship.

Initiation

A program’s matching procedures have potentially important implications for the initiation phase of mentoring relationships. Within a program context, the first step in creating a relationship is determining which mentor and youth will be paired. Consistent with theory and research, numerous factors may be useful to weigh in the matchmaking decision, such as the child’s needs, the mentor’s capabilities, the similarity of their attitudes, and the overlap of shared interests (Furano et al., 1993). In addition, many programs allow mentors and parents to indicate preferences on characteristics such as age, race, religion, and geographic proximity.

Procedures for introducing program participants to each other may influence first impressions and facilitate the process of getting acquainted. For example, a supervised prematch meeting between mentor and parent can provide an opportunity for each to discuss their respective expectations for the relationship and to assess their compatibility before actually deciding to accept or reject a proposed match. Such preliminary steps may give participants a sense of ownership, establish forthright communication, and convey useful information about what to anticipate. Similarly, the initial meeting between mentor and youth may be structured to include activities that serve as “icebreakers,” exercises for planning activities and setting goals, and reminders of program guidelines.

Growth and Maintenance

Because the growth and maintenance of mentoring relationships is inherently complex and variable, individual matches established within the same program may follow different developmental pathways. Reflecting this proposition, the research conducted to date has identified distinctive patterns of mentor-youth interaction with apparent implications for relationship success and longevity. Furthermore, even within the broad relationship categories that have been portrayed (e.g., developmental, prescriptive), there is further diversity in individual relationship experiences. Programs that provide ongoing professional supervision via regular contacts with mentors, youth, and parents have the potential to assess the patterns of interaction being established within each relationship, to provide individualized support to address relationship challenges, and to reinforce agency guidelines and interpersonal strategies that promote positive relationship development. Such supervision may be especially valuable early in a match, when the relationship is still tentative and patterns of interaction are taking shape.

Reflecting theory and research presented above, professional support to the relationship may take several forms. Caseworkers may encourage collaborative decision making about match activities and suggest ideas for activities that simultaneously build the relationship and youth competence. Another important role for the caseworker is to manage the participants’ expectations regarding the mentoring relationship and what it is intended to accomplish. For example, caseworkers may help mentors to maintain a reasonable perspective on the extent of their influence and help them find the balance between underinvolvement and overinvolvement. In this respect, guidance from caseworkers may be particularly useful when participants need to define boundaries regarding matters that involve parental responsibility (e.g., academics, youth behavior). In addition, caseworkers may intervene to promote the resolution of disagreements and conflicts that arise in the relationship. Maintaining a case record that documents these ongoing contacts with match participants may provide an invaluable history of the relationship’s development that can be used for clarifying agreements, assessing progress toward goals, recalling effective strategies, and placing the overall life of the relationship in perspective.

Although caseworker support was not a central focus of their research, Morrow and Styles (1995) reported that volunteers appreciated ideas for activities, advice about how to deal with the youth’s family, recommendations for
how to include the youth in decision making, and reminders that relationships may develop slowly. Of note, developmental volunteers commonly solicited the support of caseworkers, particularly in the formative stages of their relationships. In contrast, despite the difficulties that tended to arise in their relationships, prescriptive mentors rarely sought casework assistance and sometimes discounted the advice they received.

Another way programs may support the growth and maintenance of mentoring relationships is through a continuing series of training sessions (Herrera et al., 2000). Conceptually, follow-up training permits the application of program guidelines and professional advice to the concrete issues facing participants in their relationships. In addition, ongoing trainings can focus on selected topics relevant to specific groups of participants, such as those in relationships involving adolescents or those approaching later phases in the life course of the relationship.

Decline and Dissolution

To potentially forestall unnecessary decline and dissolution, consistent program supervision may prove valuable as means of detecting indications of relationship difficulties and facilitating their constructive resolution. Based on the research of Grossman and Rhodes (2002), it may be especially valuable to give extra attention and support to relationships in which youth have been referred due to preexisting difficulties. As noted before, the ability to overcome challenges and successfully repair ruptures may make the relationship still stronger and more enduring.

Nevertheless, a mentoring relationship is destined to end, and careful management of the match termination process offers the possibility of a positive, if painful, learning experience. Unfortunately, the process of ending mentoring relationships has received little attention in research or practice relative to its potential importance. However, theoretical considerations discussed previously suggest several promising directions for how programs may address the dissolution of mentoring relationships in a constructive manner. In a time-limited program with a predetermined closing date, the mentor can openly acknowledge well in advance that the relationship will be ending. To prepare for saying good-bye, the mentor and youth can discuss their feelings about the relationship and its conclusion, review their accomplishments and enjoyable times together, and plan a special way of marking the occasion. Final meetings might focus on projects to preserve memories of the match, such as taking photographs, exchanging letters or pictures, or creating a scrapbook.

The ending of a relationship in an open-ended mentoring program is likely to be more challenging. Nevertheless, the goal can be a process similar to the one just described. As observed previously, mentoring relationships end for a variety of reasons, and specific circumstances present different opportunities to provide program structure and support. For successful, long-lasting relationships, a date to close the match and celebrate its achievements may be chosen to correspond with another milestone event, such as the youth’s graduation. Matches ending due to a residential move or other anticipated change in circumstances also may permit a planned process around a certain date. When a relationship is ending due to lack of contact, loss of interest, frustration, or unresolved conflict, the involvement of a program professional may be valuable for addressing feelings of guilt, anger, or sadness. In private conversations with each individual, a case manager might give a clear appraisal of the reason for ending the match, review both the positive and negative aspects of the relationship, and assess the potential for a final meeting in which everybody can reach closure in an amicable fashion.

Redefinition

A formal procedure to officially end the match presents a valuable opportunity to clarify the terms of the relationship between mentor and child. Depending on the history of the match and the circumstances for its closure, the program may recommend against any future contact. In other cases, the relationship may continue with occasional activities, phone calls and letters, or holiday cards. Alternatively, the mentor may invite the youth to initiate later
contacts, perhaps to report a special accomplishment, to seek advice, or to request a reference. To avoid disappointments, both mentor and child should be conservative when making these commitments.

Often, a mentor or youth remains eligible for the program after a match ends. Some programs may attempt to match a child to a new volunteer rapidly to ease feelings of loss, but the value of this approach should be assessed according to the circumstances of each case. Theory reviewed previously suggests that each mentoring relationship, like all close relationships, should be regarded as distinctive, and thus mentors should not be seen as interchangeable. Furthermore, ideas and impressions formed in the first relationship are likely to shape expectations for the new match. Program professionals can prepare individuals for a rematch by helping them to reflect on the previous relationship for lessons about how to repeat successes and avoid difficulties.

**Future Directions**

**Synthesis**

Theory and related research on the nature and development of close relationships imply an important temporal dimension in mentoring relationships for youth. Extrapolating from this literature, it was proposed in this chapter that mentoring relationships, in the normal course of their development, are likely to navigate a series of challenges and opportunities as they trace an arc from contemplation and initiation through growth and maintenance to decline, dissolution, and redefinition. Theoretically, every relationship can be expected to chart a distinctive pathway through these stages depending upon the developmental needs, interpersonal capabilities, and social contexts of the mentor and child.

In general, research on the developmental course of youth mentoring relationships is lacking. However, findings relevant to particular stages in the model suggest that mentors are influential in setting the tone and course of relationship development. In particular, mentors employing youth-centered approaches appear to have longer and more productive relationships. Based on descriptions derived primarily from qualitative research, these mentors seem to enter their relationships with a clear vision that their purpose is to support the development of the youth with broad aims such as building the relationship, introducing opportunities, and developing competencies. Once the relationship begins, they are flexible and proceed according to the needs, interests, and circumstances of the youth. In addition, these mentors attempt to incorporate opportunities for learning and developing skills into projects that youth find interesting and engaging. Notably, however, prospective studies employing more objective measures have yet to establish whether this style of mentoring or any other particular patterns of mentor-youth interaction correspond to better outcomes for relationships or for youth. Nor is it known whether similar or different approaches are likely to facilitate the growth and maintenance of mentoring relationships in contexts other than community-based programs such as BBBS.

Finally, from a practice perspective, theory and available research suggest many ways in which mentoring programs may be able to support relationships in each phase of their development. Although program practices have rarely been the focus of investigation, greater attention to the salient issues of each developmental stage may highlight their specific contributions to effective mentoring.

**Recommendations for Research**

1. *Investigate normative trends over the course of mentoring relationships.* Studies investigating the developmental pathways followed by mentoring relationships for youth are needed. Ideally, studies would be prospective in design and include multiple and frequent assessments of the relationship. Longitudinal data of this type would permit growth curve analyses of relationship trajectories or latent transition analyses evaluating a stage model of relationship development such as the one proposed in this chapter. Long-term studies are important because the full life cycle of relationships cannot be observed for matches that are intact when a study ends, and the experience of these longer relationships may be very different from those
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that begin and end within the study period. In addition, it may be informative to follow individuals even after relationships end to investigate the potential for a continuing influence of the relationship long after actual interaction has ceased.

2. Investigate factors that account for individual differences in developmental pathways of mentoring relationships. A corresponding task is to investigate sources of variability in the development of mentoring relationships. Theoretically important factors from several domains should be considered: individual factors (e.g., age, attitudes, needs), dyadic factors (e.g., similarity), program support factors (e.g., training, casework), cultural factors (e.g., community norms), and historical factors (e.g., publicity campaigns). As knowledge in this area increases, efforts should be directed toward the development and testing of models that combine key factors from different domains to represent their holistic and interactive functioning.

3. Explore processes involved in relationship change and development. Much more can be learned about the interpersonal dynamics that contribute to developmental patterns of change and stability in mentoring relationships. This research might investigate more closely how particular types of interactions may lead relationship development to advance quickly or stall. This research also might explore how relationships adapt to changing circumstances, maturational demands, and life events. Studies that employ direct observation of relationships and those that apply data analytic strategies for time-series data, such as nonlinear dynamic modeling, could prove particularly valuable for understanding developmental processes that unfold within particular episodes or over a series of occasions within relationships.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Provide comprehensive support for all stages in the development of relationships. Program procedures for screening, training, and matching program participants are essential, but they address just the beginning phases of relationship development. Programs also should provide ongoing supervision and training to mentoring relationships throughout their life course, with practices specifically designed to address the needs of each developmental stage. To illustrate, a continuing series of training sessions first could recommend strategies for communicating in ways that facilitate the growth of relationships, then address strategies for identifying and responding to indications of relationship decline, and, finally, cover strategies for appropriately ending or redefining the terms of relationships.

2. Pursue innovative approaches for promoting relationship development. The literature reviewed for this chapter was notable for its lack of attention to three areas with potentially important implications for the development of mentoring relationships: (a) screening of youth and parents, (b) training of youth and parents, and (c) closing of matches and discussion of arrangements regarding any subsequent contact. Development of more sophisticated means for assessing child needs and family circumstances could enhance the matching process, thereby facilitating the earliest stages of relationship development. In addition, such knowledge could improve responsive service provision in later phases of relationship development. Training of youth and parents could clarify their roles and responsibilities in the match and help them develop relationship-building skills. Finally, clear expectations and procedures for ending or redefining mentoring relationships could promote constructive resolution of the mentoring experience and consolidate the accomplishments achieved during each stage of the relationship’s development.

REFERENCES


