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A steady presence in the midst of change: Nonkin natural mentors in the lives of older youth exiting foster care

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of the non-kin natural mentoring relationships among 19-year-old youths (N=189) in the process of “aging out” of the foster care system. Data for the present study are from the final interview of a longitudinal study of older youth exiting the foster care system in Missouri. Participants that reported a natural mentoring relationship at age 19 were asked a series of qualitative questions about their reported relationship. The sample in this study was 65% female and 58% youth of color. Thematic analysis, informed by relational-cultural theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997), was utilized to explore the nature of the relationships from the youth’s perspective. These youth reported having natural mentors who served in a range of roles in their lives, including youth service professionals and friends of their families. These older youth also described the (a) qualities of their natural mentors that were important to them, (b) specific features of their natural mentoring relationships that they perceived to be especially helpful, and (c) the various kinds of support these relationships had offered to them. Implications for social work policy, practice, and research are discussed.

Keywords

Natural mentoring; foster care; older youth; qualitative inquiry; relational-cultural theory

1. Introduction

The importance of supportive relationships with adults in the lives of youth has been well-documented (e.g., Scales & Gibbons, 1996). For many, parents are the source of caring relationships; yet youth also benefit from meaningful connections they form with other adults encountered in their communities, or what have been called natural mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2007). One group that may especially benefit from the support of non-parent adults serving as natural mentors is older youth “aging out” of foster care.

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Although researchers have shown that some of these youth remain in contact and are psychologically connected to their biological families, there is often conflict and unresolved emotions within these relationships and some youth give, rather than receive, support from family (Samuels, 2008). Foster care youth also report having connections beyond their families, with these youth reporting the presence of natural mentors at about the same rate as youth in the general population (Munson & McMillen, 2008; Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan & Lozano, 2008; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, in press). Beyond these accounts of prevalence, however, there has been little attention paid to the quality of the ties foster care youth form with natural mentors. The purpose of this study is to begin to illuminate the scope of what 189 older youth exiting care state about the qualities of their natural mentoring relationships, along with the kinds of support they may offer as youth transition out of care.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Until recently, research on natural mentoring has been largely atheoretical. Scholars have argued that the presence of a caring adult in the life of a high-risk youth can be “protective” (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992, 1982; Garnezy & Rutter, 1983), a “developmental asset” (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998), and a “secure base” from which to explore the world (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Further, little is currently known about the qualities of natural mentoring relationships, such as the kinds of interactions that take place between mentors and youth or the nature and range of the support provided (Spencer, 2007). Researchers studying formal mentoring relationships, or those established through formal programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters, have only recently begun to conceptualize and empirically test the processes that occur in mentoring relationships (i.e., Rhodes, 2002; Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lily, 2002). Rhodes (2002) proposed a model of youth mentoring that conceptualizes mentoring relationships as connections built on mutuality, trust, and empathy that impact youth through three interrelated processes, namely socio-emotional, cognitive, and role modeling processes.

Of late, researchers have also begun to explore the application of the core foundational concepts of relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976) to mentoring and other supportive relationships with nonparent adults in the lives of youth (Spencer, 2006; Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004) and young adults (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002). Relational-cultural theory, which is grounded in decades of clinical practice, proposes that “growth-fostering” relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997) built on respect, mutuality, empathy, and authenticity, lead to psychological growth and well being, as they “invite exposure, curiosity, and openness to possibility,” while also “providing safety from contempt and humiliation” (Walker, 2004, p. 9). According to relational-cultural theory, respect includes being open to and respectful of another person’s past life experiences and all of their complexities (Walker, 2004). Authenticity is described as the ability to be present within a relationship, to be able to fully bring oneself into the relationship, and to be real, or genuine, with another person (Miller et al., 2004; Spencer, 2006). Jordan, Surrey, and Kaplan (1999) explain that empathy involves the ability to accurately perceive another’s affective state, hold another’s feelings, and show them you understand. The present study extends relational cultural theory by investigating its applicability to the natural mentoring relationships among older youth exiting care, many of whom have experienced relational violations.

1.2 Natural Mentoring in the Lives of Older Youth in Foster Care

As youth leave the child welfare system, family and community supports are increasingly needed. Social service professionals often work extensively to reconnect older youth to family and natural supports in their lives, especially as they are nearing their exit from care systems (Munson & Scott, 2008). Due to the lack of supports in the lives of some older youth, mentoring programs are receiving increased attention as a potential strategy to help during the transition

from involvement in care systems to increased independence (Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, in press). Yet, there is little research on the mentoring relationships among this population – whether formal or natural. Two recent studies examining the efficacy of natural mentoring for older youth exiting care provide some promising evidence for the positive contributions such relationships may make to these youth's lives. One study found that, among 339 19-year-old youth exiting foster care, those that reported a natural mentoring relationship that had lasted over one-year also reported lower levels of perceived stress when compared to those with no mentor (Munson & McMillen, 2009). Another study (N=310) found that foster care youth with natural mentors reported less suicidal ideation, better overall health, fewer sexually transmitted disease diagnoses and less involvement in fights in which they hurt someone than those without a natural mentor (Ahrens, et al., 2008).

As to the qualities of these relationships, one study of youth who recently transitioned out of foster care found that the key characteristics of these supportive people were their acceptance of the young person, constant encouragement, reliability, and ability to provide assistance when needed. (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, in press). Another recent study examined the qualities of natural mentoring relationships among seven adolescent females in foster care and found that trust, love, caring and experiencing a natural mentor like a parent were salient characteristics endorsed by participants (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). The same study also found that different types of social support from natural mentors were important to the older youth, such as emotional support, informational support and appraisal support (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Samuels and Pryce (2008) interviewed 44 Midwestern young adults aging out of foster care. Their data suggested that the views of the young adults regarding reaching out for help are similar to dominant Western cultural norms, which promote self-reliance and independence. They found that self-reliance, as opposed to dependence on others, was a source of resilience for abused youth, which they concluded may hinder them from connecting to supports.

1.3 Research on the Nature of Mentoring Relationships

Due to the dearth of research on natural mentoring among older youth in foster care, the present study was also informed by related research on formal and natural mentoring more generally. In one of the first studies examining the nature of youth mentoring relationships, Morrow and Styles (1995) utilized semi-structured interviews with 82 pairs of youth and mentor participants in a formal mentoring program and found two distinct types of relationships, developmental and prescriptive. Developmental relationships, which were more successful, involved mentors who allowed time for the development of a firm foundation for the relationship and the building of trust before encouraging behavioral changes in mentees. Prescriptive relationships, in contrast, involved mentors whose goal was to transform the youth from the beginning. This early study illuminated the importance of time and trust in developing successful mentoring relationships. Also, researchers have examined the nature of supportive relationships among disadvantaged young adults. Through content analysis of interviews with 15 mothers, ages 21 to 25, Leadbeater and Way (2001) reported that, beyond strong and authoritative maternal relationships, family and role model relationships provided support and a sense that someone was “there for me [them].” Nonparent adults, such as a nun who ran a residential program, provided positive support to the mothers in their study.

Finally, studies have empirically examined relational-cultural theory concepts as they apply to supportive relationships, including mentoring relationships. Spencer (2006) examined the core qualities underlying dyadic formal youth mentoring relationships among youth that had experienced difficult circumstances (e.g., poverty) and found that authenticity, empathy, collaboration and companionship emerged in successful mentoring relationships. Youth reported that mentors needed to be real with them in order for them to consider getting close. Empathy was predominately illustrated as mentors making the effort to understand their

protégés experiences within the context of their complex lives (Spencer, 2006). In another study, Spencer, Jordan and Sazama (2004) examined the nature of supportive relationships among 91 youth participants and the important adults in their lives. They found that youth valued respect, mutuality and authenticity in these relationships. Mutual respect, limit-setting, listening, empathizing and genuine understanding were discussed as critical to developing connections with caring adults. In this study, good listening was the key to authenticity. Sparks (2004) investigated the relational lives of delinquent female adolescents, many of whom had experienced abuse. Sparks (2004) highlighted that the women in her group trusted very few people, felt they had to keep their feelings inside, and perceived that nobody could really help them, or said another way, that it is easier to get through life on one's own.

These realities expressed by the young women in Sparks' (2004) study shed light on how hard it might be for young people that have experienced abuse to bring their authentic selves into relationships. After repeated betrayals of trust, individuals may learn that it is protective to trust few people and that it may be less painful to just go it alone, or rely only on oneself. Natural mentoring relationships, if they are growth-fostering, may offer a set of relational conditions that may make it possible for older youth with such histories to experience some people as trustworthy and helpful. Ultimately, positive relational experiences may make it possible for these young adults to be increasingly more open and connected to others in healthy and supportive ways.

1.4 Present Study

The present study begins to fill the gap that exists in the literature on the nature and qualities of the natural mentoring relationships of older youth exiting the foster care system and the supportive adult mentors in their lives. The overarching research questions were what relational qualities and kinds of social support matter to older youth nearing their exit from the foster care system specifically when discussing unrelated natural mentors they perceive to be supporting them during the transition to adulthood. The data were drawn from a larger study of older youth from Missouri that were exiting foster care (See McMillen et al., 2004). Relational-cultural theory provided a framework for understanding how specific dimensions of these relationships may be contributing to these youth's development from the perspective of the youth themselves.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The 406 older youth in the larger study from which the participants for the present study were drawn were interviewed nine times between their 17th and 19th birthdays. Interviews were conducted between December 2001 and May 2003. Two studies have been published on the natural mentoring relationships among 339 of these older youth who were interviewed at 18 years of age (See Munson & McMillen, 2008, 2009). Participants (n=189) in the present study are all youth that reported the presence of a natural mentor at 19 and answered the qualitative questions. This includes youth that were interviewed at 18 and were included in the studies referenced above, along with additional youth that became reconnected to the study at 19 (not included in the 339). Participants were 65% female (n=123) and 58% youth of color (n=111). Seventy percent of the participants (n=133) had experienced at least one type of abuse or neglect. Physical abuse and neglect was measured by the Child Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). A previously published cut-off score of 10 or above was utilized to indicate moderate to severe abuse and neglect. Sexual abuse was assessed with three items adapted from a previous study (Russell, 1986). Participants were asked to indicate (a) if they were ever made to touch someone's private parts against their wishes, (b) if anyone had ever touched their private parts (breasts or genitals) against their wishes, and (c) if anyone ever had

vaginal, oral, or anal sex with them against their wishes. Youth responding “yes” to any of the questions were identified as having a history of sexual abuse and youth responding “no” to all three questions were identified as having no history of sexual abuse. Thirty-three percent of the participants met criteria for a lifetime DSM IV mental disorder, which was measured by the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for the DSM IV (Robins, Cottler, Bucholz, & Compton, 1995).

2.2 Procedures

Nonkin natural mentors in the present study were defined as adults that are often older than you, and are willing to listen, share their experiences and guide you through some part or area of your life. At 19, youth in the larger study that responded yes to whether or not they had a mentor that met the aforementioned definition were asked a series of questions, including six questions that were the focus of the analyses in the present study: 1) How did you meet this person?; 2) Is this someone you met through a program or service your caseworker or another professional referred you to?; 3) What makes this person easy to relate to?; 4) Can you give me an example of what makes this person _____? [Insert description from previous question]; 5) What do you think makes them someone that you choose to listen to?; and, 6) Can you give me an example of some advice that your mentor gave you that you listened to? A total of 194 youth reported the presence of a natural mentor at 19 and answered the qualitative questions. Of those, five youth were excluded as they answered “don’t know” to every question or their responses revealed their natural mentor did not fit the definition for the study. The qualitative transcripts of the 189 remaining youth were analyzed for the present study.

Responses to the above questions were entered into an ACCESS database and then transferred into Word documents. These documents were then uploaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program that allows multiple coders to code the same transcripts in separate files called Hermeneutic Units (HUs). A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that was informed by relational-cultural theory was conducted through the following steps: (1) initial coding of all transcripts by two coders, (2) development of themes based on initial codes, and (3) the development of coding trees to examine the relationships between and among codes and themes. Specifically, researchers coded all transcripts in separate HUs creating initial codes that best represented the youth’s actual words. Upon completion of initial coding, coders individually analyzed their codes and came up with conceptualizations of the meaning of the data and how the codes were related to one another based on previous scholarship and their own practice experience. Then, investigators came together multiple times to discuss codes, the relationships between them, and the larger themes generated. This process allowed for variations in the interpretation of the perceived meaning(s) of responses. When discrepancies between coders occurred, they were discussed and decisions were made on how to code passages. Reliability was established by comparing and contrasting data elements. Through this process, a master HU with one set of quotations, codes and themes was created. Finally, investigators developed coding trees, which are visual depictions of themes and the relationships between themes, codes and quotations to further examine the data. Investigators met numerous times to examine codes, coding trees, and themes to make decisions about the meaning of the data. Investigators continually returned to previous research and theoretical writing on the nature of supportive relationships and relational-cultural concepts to compare and contrast results to previous scholarship.

3. Results

Analyses yielded descriptive information about the nature of the nonkin natural mentoring relationships and the support they offered the youth. Results are grouped into four major categories: (a) types of natural mentors, (b) qualities of these mentors, (c) qualities of the natural

mentoring relationships, and (d) the nature of the various forms of support these relationships offered to the youth participants at this critical time in their lives. Themes and exemplar quotes from these categories are presented in Table 1.

3.1 Types of Natural Mentors

The two most common types of mentors reported were “friend of the family” and “staff at former placement.” For a list of the types of mentors nominated in the present study see Table 2. Of note, twenty youth reported natural mentors that did not fit into any of the larger categories and were thus coded “other”. Examples of natural mentors in this category are a coach and an owner of an independent living program.

3.2 Qualities of the Natural Mentor

3.2.1 Personality Qualities—Common personality qualities that youth valued in their natural mentors were identified. Mentors were described as being approachable and easy to be with as evidenced by the youth’s descriptions of them as “down to earth,” “funny,” “honest/truthful,” “humble,” “kind,” “easy going” and “good personality.” As one youth simply stated, “I got a good vibe from her.” These qualities helped youth relate to or listen to their natural mentors. A few youth also appreciated it when mentors were close to their age: “not that much older than me,” “young and not old.”

3.2.2. Understanding—Many youth described their natural mentors as “understanding” - of people in general, “seems to understand people” and more specifically, teenagers, “he understands the problems of being an adolescent,” “He understands-knows what teenagers go through.” Being an understanding person was a quality that these youth experienced as making their natural mentors easier to relate to and something that distinguished these adults from some of the other adults in their lives. The mentors were also characterized by many youth as being “easy to talk to” and people with whom these youth could comfortably talk about “serious things” or talk to when they had a “problem.”

3.2.3. Similarities—Most of the respondents emphasized similarities between their mentors and themselves, whether in terms of personalities, interests, life experiences or backgrounds as an aspect of the mentor that enhanced their relationship. One youth, speaking about similarities in personalities, said “I act like her when she was my age,” and another commented “she had a quick temper growing up, too.” Some youth also shared that they appreciated sharing interests or activities with mentors, such as “we like to club and go to play dominos. We like to hang out.” Finally, many youth emphasized the need for natural mentors to have gone through similar struggles, such as having experienced similar challenges in life, such as also being a foster child, struggling with substance abuse, or becoming parents at an early age. Natural mentors that had similar life experiences were professionals (e.g., teachers, child welfare professionals), friends of the family and community members (e.g., neighbors). Being a parent was another kind of shared experience that was valued by the youth with children, as evidenced in the following quotes: “she talks about how she handles things as a mom” and “she just had a baby, good to talk with about baby stuff.”

3.3. Qualities of the Relationship

Youth endorsed a number of qualities of natural mentoring relationships that were especially important to them. Their mentoring relationships offered consistency and longevity, in some cases more so than any other relationship in their lives. Other salient relationship qualities were trust, empathy and authenticity.

3.3.1 Consistency and Maintaining Contact—Many youth indicated the importance of mentors maintaining contact and showing consistency despite crises or poor choices the youth may have made over the course of the relationship. As one youth noted, “every time I call her she comes no matter what.” One of the most frequently coded phrases was that the nominated mentor was “always there.” A few older youth also reported that natural mentors invested a significant amount of time in their relationships with them: “she takes her time with me. She listens to all of my situations.” The youth also noted that their natural mentors checked up on them and kept in contact even when youth failed to keep in touch. As one youth remarked, “He showed interest in wanting to help. Sometimes I don't call him, but he calls me.”

3.3.2. Longevity—Some youth responses highlighted the importance of longevity in these relationships, with one describing the mentor as someone who “has always been there to stay and listen to whatever I have to say,” and another youth saying the mentor had, “been there for me for a long time. I think he really cares that I am ok.” Some youth reported adults are easy to relate to when they have been around for awhile, with one commenting, “I have been knowing her since I was nine.” These comments spoke to the youth’s sense that it was important that their mentors had known them over time, in part because of the depth of knowledge of one another that had been accrued.

3.3.3. Trust—Similar to the finding by Greeson & Bowen (2008), trust was an aspect of the relationship that youth in the present study indicated they valued in their natural mentoring relationships. Comments such as, “I trust him,” “I had no one to talk to but I trusted her,” and “I know that she wouldn't tell me anything that would harm me” were common statements made by the youth. For a few, an important dimension of trust was the mentor maintaining confidentiality: “When I go to her with something I know it's private. I know I can trust her.”

3.3.4. Authenticity—Authenticity, from a relational-cultural perspective, has been defined by Jordan (in Miller et al., 1999) as a “quality of presence” characterized by “relational responsiveness,” that allows a relational partner to have access to one’s thoughts feelings and intentions and also involves offering perceivable and engaging responses to the thoughts, feelings and intentions of the other person (p. 3). Authenticity in relationships means that both partners are able to be authentic, in ways that are in keeping with one’s roles in different types of relationships. The youth spoke about how their mentors evidenced authenticity in the relationship, which seemed to create a context within which the youth felt comfortable talking openly about their struggles. These youth emphasized their mentor’s genuine interest in them, their willingness and ability to be present and to show that they cared, and their ability to listen well. As one young person noted, about the mentor, “He shows that he genuinely cares about me and loves me.” Many of these youth talked about how their mentors were “real” with them, both by offering honest opinions rather than “beating around the bush” and creating spaces within which these youth felt they could “talk honestly about things.”

This authentic quality of presence was also marked by the mentors’ capacity for listening well, which was often described in a way that suggested that these youth thought that some adults do not really listen. As one youth said, “he actually seems to listen when you talk to him.” They further explicated that quality listening includes not always immediately jumping in with feedback: “good listener, listens first then gives advice” and “She lets me talk. She waits until you are finished talking first before she responds.” Their mentor’s non-judgmental presence was important to these youth, as evidenced in one youth’s statement, “Whatever I have to say, she listens. She doesn't form an opinion. She lets me know how she would handle a situation.” This kind of open, engaged and non-judgmental listening seemed to create a relational context within which the youth felt comfortable sharing their own authentic thoughts and feelings. As one youth noted about the mentor, “she listens closely and hears me fully.”

Some youth's comments suggested the importance of mentors being genuine and real with them about their own lives. Youth's statements suggest that natural mentors are willing to not only hear youths' experiences, but share their own experiences with the youth. About the mentor, one youth said, "she opened up to me without me asking" and another noted, "she tells me her experiences." Also a quality of sharing of themselves was discussed with regard to being direct with older youth. Many youth described the communication style of their natural mentors, focusing on how their mentors spoke to them in a direct, authentic, and non-condescending manner. The directness of the mentors is reflected in these youth's descriptions of their communication, "she doesn't substitute words to make it sound like the right thing to say, she just says it." Another youth commented on the non-condescending way the mentor communicated, saying the mentor "talks to me like I'm a person, not a child." The directness of the communication in these relationships is a theme that is echoed in these youth's descriptions of the advice provided to them by their mentors (See section 3.4).

3.3.5. Respect—Some youth valued their mentors showing them respect. Respect had several dimensions, including treating the youth in a respectful manner more generally ("Treats me with respect"), demonstrating respect for them as a person ("She is willing to respect me for who I am"), and respecting their need for space and boundaries. Respect in many forms was important to the youth in the present study.

3.3.6. Empathy—Spencer (2006) emphasizes that the root of empathy comes from mentors truly understanding the youth within the larger context of their complex lives. In these data, youth repeatedly suggested that they experienced this kind of empathy through their statements about feeling known and understood by their natural mentors. The longevity of many of these relationships, as described in 3.3.2, was part of what gave the youth the sense that their mentors seemed to "really know" them: "I have dealt with her for a long time. She knows and understands me." Youth further emphasized feeling that their mentors knew and accepted them for who they are. As one youth said about the mentor, "lets me be myself and accepts me for who I am." Youth also repeatedly emphasized feeling understood by their mentors: "No one understands me more than she does." This feeling of being understood seemed to stem in part from knowing that the mentor had experienced some similar challenges (as noted in 3.2.3), which the mentors had evidently shared with the youth: "he knows what it is like to have family problems and to grow up in the system." The narratives of these youth suggested that they felt that their mentor's could better understand them in part because they demonstrated their knowledge and awareness of the complexities inherent in their lives in the foster care system.

3.4. Nature of Support

These youth experienced their natural mentoring relationships as offering a variety of forms of social support. Social support includes a variety of helping behaviors, and has often included three primary types of support, namely informational support (advice), emotional support (including encouragement) and concrete or tangible support (e.g., money, transportation) (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; Gottlieb, 1983; House & Kahn, 1985). Mentors in the present study described some of these classic forms of social support, such as informational and tangible support, in addition to a type of support described as "keeping them on track," or checking in and checking up on them to make sure they were doing okay. Natural mentors in the present study were trusted advisors who could be counted on to advise them to avoid poor decisions and stay out of trouble. Finally, youth spoke about the importance of mentors not forcing the advice, but offering it without expectations of it being taken or followed, as evidenced in one youth's comment that the mentor "gives advice as something she would do-does not force it on you."

3.4.1. Keeping Youth “On Track”—For many youth, their mentor was someone to whom they felt accountable to in a meaningful way. They described their mentors as people who “make(s) sure I am on top of my responsibilities,” tell them when they disagree with their choices, and are “not afraid to tell the truth.” Some youth also talked about mentors generally keeping them on “the right track.” Direct and honest feedback from the mentors seemed to play a key role in this process. As one youth said about the mentor, “If I am doing something stupid, he is always willing to tell me.” Some youth preferred mentors be honest with them and hold them accountable for their behavior. Also important was the fact that their actions and decisions seemed to matter to their mentors. As one youth noted, her mentor “fusses when I get into trouble.”

3.4.2. Instrumental/Tangible Support—Youth noted both their mentors’ general helpfulness (“they know more than I do and they are helpful in a lot of situations”) as well as citing specific areas where mentors provided help and support. These included concrete or instrumental forms of support in critical arenas such as childcare (“She always volunteers to take the kids somewhere”), housing (“she lets me live with her right now. If I were not with her then I’d be on the street”), and monetary support (“Financially - he supports me”). Other types of instrumental support included job and school assistance. As one youth said about the mentor, “She helped me look for a job. She also helped me with my schooling.”

3.4.3. Informational Support (Advice)—Mentors offered informational support in a variety of areas, such as education, relationships, and making the transition to adult life. In some cases this took the form of serving as an object lesson (“She tries to stop me from going down the wrong roads that she has been down”) in others mentors offered “warnings” (“She helps me to stay out of trouble. Slow down with the boys. She is always warning me.”). Many youth indicated that they found the advice offered by mentors to be helpful, sound and trustworthy: “her advice has always been good” and “gives me good information about life.”

Mentors most often provided advice on education. The youth indicated that their mentors had encouraged them to continue with their schooling, whether to finish high school, get a GED or pursue a college education even while parenting. One youth described how such advice had positively influenced her: “She encouraged me to take the ACT so I took it and got a good score and now I feel better and will work the GED program to get out and go to college. She encourages me in my education.”

The youth also spoke about mentors offering advice on many aspects of their personal relationships, for example, specific intimate relationship advice and how to manage peer relationships. Some youth reported that their mentors emphasized using caution in all types of relationships, reportedly saying things like, “don’t trust people so much,” “stand up for [your] self” and “put [your]self first instead of always helping others.” Some also noted that their mentors had advised them about specific ways to manage their intimate relationships (“In a fight with my girlfriend she told me to go home and treat her right”) and encouraged them not place too much focus on their dating or intimate relationships (“don’t keep my mind on girls all of the time”). Some youth also described their mentors providing advice about their peer relationships, including general counsel and specific cautions, such as “be yourself-If they don’t like you for who you are it is not worth it” and “Treat your friends like a long handled spoon, because once they are too close, something happens.”

Further, natural mentors advised youth on how to manage their transition to adulthood and the heightened responsibility and independent decision-making associated with these changes. This included advice on money and budgeting, (“Don’t buy all new stuff when you move out”), household management, employment, and career development. Youth also stated their mentors had given them general life management tips. For example, one youth noted being told by the

mentor “do not focus on anything but getting your life straight” and another was told “Not to let the problems I am dealing with affect my future.” Youth also described how their mentors offered parenting suggestions including how to parent and avoiding becoming a parent until later in life. Finally, advice was given to many youth related to coping with the challenges of transitioning to adulthood. Natural mentors advised some youth against the use of or involvement with alcohol, drugs and tobacco. A few youth also noted that their mentors had suggested they seek a relationship with God, or in the words of one youth, to “give all my problems to God.” Finally, youth commonly reported natural mentors gave advice or encouragement on general perseverance, saying things like “don't let none of that stuff get you down, keep your head up and don't give up.”

3.4.4. Emotional Support—The support provided by natural mentors extended beyond the instrumental and informational and included emotional and behavioral support. Youth described their mentors talking through important and emotionally difficult issues with them. These older youth talked about how their mentors had helped them think about difficult aspects of their lives in new ways and “break(ing) down things to make me understand them more clear (sic).” For example, one youth, whose mentor was a clergy member, noted that this mentor had “...made me see that my adoptive mom could see how bad my biological family was, she was not making it all up.”

4. Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to begin to understand the nature of nonkin natural mentoring relationships among older youth in the process of exiting foster care from the perspectives of the transitioning youth themselves. Analyses of youth responses to a series of open-ended questions revealed information about who their natural mentors were, the roles these adults had played in their lives, some of the qualities of the adults and of the relationships and the many different forms of support the youth had experienced in the context of these important relationships.

Natural mentors in this study represented a variety of roles in the youth's lives but were predominately friends of the family, professionals and various community members. These types of natural mentors, in addition to extended family, were reported in another study of natural mentors in the lives of transitioning youth in the Northeast (Collins et al., in press). Some of the salient qualities of the mentors included their understanding and non-judgmental nature which made them easy to talk to and the directness of their communication and advice. The fact that many mentors shared, and had shared with the youth, experiences of similar challenge and hardship in their own lives seemed to render these adults as especially trustworthy and credible sources of support. Some of these youth also emphasized the importance of the enduring nature of their ties with these important adults through their comments about how these mentors knew a great deal about their past experiences and had been there with them through various transitions in their lives.

The importance of similarities in life experiences stood out throughout the youth's responses. These older youth appreciated mentors who they felt were “like them” in personality, that liked to do the same things, and that have been through similar situations or struggles coming up in the world. It was particularly important to youth that natural mentors understood what they had been through and the youth's statements revealed that this was possible when mentors had shared experiences such as engagement with public systems themselves (e.g., jail, foster care). The data from this study suggests that those developing mentoring initiatives for older youth in foster care may want to encourage and support relationships that develop naturally among foster care youth and the important adults in their lives, as many of them have had similar experiences as them or have grown up having had similar life experiences. If program

developers initiate formal mentoring programs for this population, these data suggest that it would be prudent to recruit adults that have similar life experiences, particularly those that have had some type of involvement themselves with public systems of care, as this seems to matter to older youth. This study suggests that this quality may make it easier for older system-involved youth to relate with and listen to these adults. Having another person that is older than them and has lived through similar tragedies was important to them and it came up repetitively in this study. While only speculation, having had similar difficult experiences may minimize shame and lead to youth bringing more of themselves into the relationships.

Important qualities of the mentoring relationship included trust, consistency, empathy, and authenticity on the part of both the mentors and the youth. These youth's descriptions of their natural mentoring relationships revealed that many of these older youth perceived their natural mentors as adults who *can* be trusted, in contrast to other adults they have encountered, and can provide them with a sense of feeling cared for and even loved. Although the present study only asked six questions and only heard one perspective on a relationship involving two individuals, youth statements such as "I had no one to talk to but I trusted her" and "When I go to her with something I know it's private. I know I can trust her" strongly suggest that the older youth in this study feel that their natural mentors were particularly trustworthy. In a study of the relational lives of delinquent females, Sparks (2004) reported that many of the girls, most of whom had been abused and neglected, felt extremely unsafe in most relationships and perceived them as dangerous emotionally and physically. We suspect that some of the youth in this study felt that way too, having experienced similar histories of abuse; however, data from the present study suggests that some of them found in their natural mentoring relationship a person they trusted and one that they perceived cared about them a great deal and knew and understood them. This is promising and worth further investigation.

Similar to Leadbeater and Way's research on low-income young adult mothers (2001), data in the present study suggest that older youth exiting foster care value having someone that maintains contact, stays by their side, and is simply *there for them*. The narratives of these youth also suggest that some had natural mentoring relationships with adults who stood by them through difficult periods of their lives. As older youth in foster care commonly experience multiple moves in their lives, the consistent presence of a trusted and caring adult over the course of these many transitions may be especially meaningful to them.

Our investigation of the applicability of relational-cultural theory concepts to the natural mentoring relationships among older youth in the process of exiting foster care proved to be fruitful. The findings extend relational-cultural theory concepts, such as empathy and authenticity, by contextualizing these concepts within the experiences of a group of older youth that have histories that commonly include abuse and the insults of spending time in the foster care system. Data suggest that authenticity is a critical component of natural mentoring relationships among older youth exiting foster care and the important natural supports in their lives. Authenticity is thought to include the capacity to share one's real self, or authentic self, with another fully in a relationship and it has also been described as a quality of presence, or being available to another, in a relationship (Miller et al., 2004). Authenticity was predominately discussed, in this study, as genuine interest and caring, taking time with youth, quality listening, and a quality described by many as realness, or being real. Many of these dimensions of authenticity have been found in other studies of youth mentoring relationships. For example, Spencer (2006) indicated authenticity in formal mentoring relationships is primarily defined as youth and mentors being "*real*" with each other and expressing (not hiding) their genuine feelings. Our data support this notion, with numerous youth offering responses about mentors keeping things real. As far as sharing their feelings, youth in the present study trusted their mentors and were willing to share important, and at times what may have even been experienced as shameful, aspects of their experiences, with their mentors. Many

mentors having themselves experienced similar challenges and circumstances in their own lives seemed to contribute to these experiences of authenticity in these relationships.

Many foster care youth have often experienced traumatic events, such as abuse, removal from home and difficulties that emerge from spending time in the system. Histories such as these can lead individuals to consider relationships and becoming seen, known and understood by another as emotionally and physically dangerous (See Sparks, 2004). The words “*known*” and “*understood*,” along with their derivatives, such as know and understand, however, were frequently utilized in participant responses. Data on being known and feeling understood and respected are suggestive of empathy. Youth responses suggested they felt understood by mentors and that it was important to them that their mentors seemed to “really” know and respect them. The present study, however, did not collect data from mentors and therefore we cannot report whether or not mentors actually did understand and feel the experiences that youth share with them. In-depth interview data with both relational partners, such as that collected with matches in formal mentoring relationships (Morrow & Styles, 1995; Spencer, 2006) is needed to understand relational empathy between older youth in foster care and their natural mentors. With these data, we suggest that being known and feeling understood were nascent lower level codes to a higher level concept, empathy; however, data elements did not explicitly illustrate that youth felt empathy or experienced empathy from their natural mentors.

Samuels and Pryce (2008) found that young adults more often seek instrumental forms of support, such as help with housing, but that their pride may hinder them from asking for emotional support. Data from this study revealed that both of these forms of support were perceived by the older youth as valuable. Further, in some cases, youth responses in the present study highlighted that natural mentors reached out to them, or called them to offer emotional support without the youth even having to ask for help.

In general, youth in the present study liked that their natural mentors were direct with them, respected them, and held them accountable. Other mentoring studies have not reported this finding. A study on young adults, however, reported that they often want another person in their lives that will hold them accountable and set limits (Leadbeater & Way, 2001). It is interesting, however, that in the present study this quality existed alongside responses that illustrated the value placed on mentors always being there, and being there no matter what they did or said, suggesting an unconditional quality to the relationship. More research is needed to explore with older youth exiting foster care the value of mentoring relationships being unconditional and also providing limit-setting and boundaries.

5. Limitations

The present study has important limitations to consider along with the results. First, while we have data from 189 youth, the data are from transcripts responding to only six questions. In many cases, the responses lacked depth. Also, more focused relational research is needed to build on these preliminary results. Further, the study analyzes data from one half of a relational dyad, which limits the ability to understand the qualities of the relationship from both parties of the relationship. Also, it is a limitation that the study focuses on nonkin mentors and hones in on one natural mentoring relationship. Future studies should focus on learning about both kin and nonkin natural mentors that are involved in the lives of older youth. Studies that garner the perspectives of both youth and mentor (such as that conducted by Spencer, 2006), would add greatly to our understanding of natural mentoring relationships. Further, generalizability is limited as the youth are exiting foster care from one Midwestern state.

6. Implications

Even with the aforementioned limitations, the present study begins to paint a descriptive picture of the qualities of natural mentoring relationships among older youth in foster care. The present study has important implications for policy, practice, and research. First, legislation referred to as the Foster Care Mentoring Act of 2009, S. 986, has been introduced in the senate to support “the establishment or expansion and operation of programs using a network of public and private community entities to provide mentoring for children in foster care” (p. 1) and it has been referred to the Senate Committee on Finance for review (S. 986, 2009). Data from the present study can be utilized to arm policymakers as they make the case that natural mentors are perceived by transitioning foster care youth, in many cases, as trustworthy and caring adults, that are authentic, and provide guidance on important areas of adult development. Also, policymakers need to consider that, in studies of natural supports among older youth in care, including this one, natural supports are sometimes professionals from the child welfare system. Policymakers may want to consider writing legislation to provide guidance and funding to support the extension of these relationships into the early adult years.

This study presents many implications for practice. First and foremost, these data suggest that mentoring relationships between older youth in the process of exiting care and unrelated adults in their lives are perceived by some youth as providing consistency, authenticity, and a person with whom they can share their life experiences. Older youth exiting foster care have often experienced a myriad of failed relationships and they have often had to abruptly end relationships due to placement transitions. Indeed, the large majority of the participants in the present study experienced at least one type of moderate to severe abuse and/or neglect. Individuals that experience difficult circumstances such as these are likely to have a difficult time developing trust, opening up to others, asking for help and believing that others will be there for them in hard times. While natural mentoring relationships, along with mentoring programs, alone may not dramatically change these young adult’s life outcomes, they may be one step toward healing and safe, growth-fostering connection with another person. As Rhodes and colleagues (2006) have argued, they may have the potential to serve as a “corrective experience” that older youth may transfer to their relationships with others (p. 692). Organizations serving youth transitioning from care should look carefully at ways of supporting existing natural mentoring relationships, especially those of longevity and high quality rather than trying to create new ones with adults who may not share some of the important similarities identified by these youth and that may or may not take hold. Finally, these data suggest that in the development of structured mentoring programs, developers should focus recruitment efforts on finding adults that have had similar experiences, such as also having been involved with public systems of care, or, at least, share similar backgrounds.

Research in this area has only begun. Continued research that investigates supportive relationships between system-involved youth and the supportive adults in their everyday lives will add to our understanding of the ways these relationships may help older youth as they transition out of the foster care system and into more independent, and hopefully productive, adult roles. Also, relational research, interviewing both members of the relationship individually and together offers the possibility of moving beyond building our understanding based on one person’s perceptions of the relationship, most often that of the youth. Also, observational research would move us beyond relying on self-perceptions and allow for the study of the nature of the interactions between youth and their mentors. Further, research that explores how older youth in foster care connect with natural mentors and cultivate these relationships can provide important information to inform those that are working to develop mentoring programs and initiatives. Further, studies that examine the effects of mentoring programs that offer matched mentors versus programs that focus on extending support to natural mentoring relationships would greatly inform best practices in mentoring for this

population. Finally, more in-depth research is needed on the qualities that youth most desire in their natural mentors and whether there are distinctions in the kind of support that is provided from natural mentors who are kin, nonkin, and professionals. These types of studies can collectively inform child welfare professionals as they develop practice guidelines for mentoring initiatives in the communities throughout the country that are developing mentoring initiatives for foster care youth.

In conclusion, the present study supports the notion that nonkin natural mentors are perceived as providing an authentic, caring connection for many older youth in the process of exiting foster care. While most of these youth have difficult relational pasts, data suggest that for many of them there are caring adults in their lives that are worthy of their trust and time.

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Table 1

Themes and Exemplar Quotations

Major Themes	Exemplar Quotations
Qualities of Mentor	
Personality qualities	"Is cool"
Understanding	"She is really nice and understanding"
Easy to talk to	"Easy person to talk with."
	"Easy to talk to when I have a problem, can go to her,"
	"I can talk to him about serious things and I still feel comfortable."
Similar to youth	
Personality	"because we have similar personalities"
	"pretty much the same person"
	"[we] both talk a lot."
Interests	"We like to do the same things"
	"we both know how to sing in the church choir"
Life experiences/ background	"Most of the things that I am going through or the things that I have been through, she has experienced as well."
	"she was also a foster child"
	"we have both struggled with drugs and she gives me support and helps me to read verses that remind me I am doing the right thing to get clean"
	"he's also been in prison"
	"we grew up the same, had the same background, been through a lot of the same things"
	"we both had kids at a young age."
Qualities of Mentoring Relationship	
Consistency	"She was always there for me when I needed someone"
	"she is the only person who sticks by my side" "since my mom died, she has stuck by me through a lot of problems."
	"He's always there when I need him"
	"She was there when I needed her the most" "Anything that I have been through, she's always been there for me."
Longevity	"We have been knowing each other for years."
	"known each other so long that he just knows me"
	"Known forever and she's known everything I've been through"
	"He has been there for me for a long time."
Trust	"I can trust her"
	"If you tell them something they don't tell everybody else"
Authenticity	"She's a good listener. She also responds well."
	"she tells me her experiences"
	"if she does not agree with what I do, she tells me"
	"if I tell him something regardless if it is good or bad they tell me the truth"
Respect	"Treats me with respect"

Major Themes	Exemplar Quotations
Empathy	<p>“She respects my boundaries”</p> <p>“She knows and understands me”</p> <p>“know(s) me for who I am”</p> <p>“She can relate to what I’ve been through. I am more comfortable talking to her about my problems”</p> <p>“Her dad passed away not too long ago so she understands what I am going through”</p> <p>“She understands the challenges of being in this situation.”</p>
Nature of Support	
Keeping youth on track	<p>“He calls to see just how I’m doing”</p> <p>“she calls when she thinks I need help.”</p> <p>“Makes sure I’m on top of my responsibilities,” “he knows what is best for me” and “keeps me on the right track.”</p>
Instrumental Support	“When I did not have a place to go she let me stay with her”
Informational Support	<p>“You need to stop drinking so much.”</p> <p>“she gives advice on how to save money on pampers and other baby items”</p> <p>“Going through to college despite having my baby”</p> <p>“Getting back and finishing high school”</p> <p>“Stay in school”</p> <p>“messing around with boys will not get me anywhere”</p> <p>“two months ago I got beat up by my boyfriend and I wanted to go back to him and she told me not to.”</p>
Emotional Support	“Helps me cope”

Table 2

Types of Natural Mentors (n=189)

Type of Natural Mentor	Percentage
Professionals	
Staff at former placement	23% (n=44)
Teachers	8% (n=15)
Caseworkers	5% (n=9)
Former foster parents	4% (n=7)
Former counselors/therapists	4% (n=7)
Community Members	
Friends of the family	25% (n=48)
Clergy/Church Members	5% (n=10)
Neighbors/Neighborhood Org. Staff	5 % (n = 9)
Relatives of friends/significant others	4% (n=7)
Older Friends	4% (n=7)
Coworkers	3% (n=6)
Other	10% (n=20)