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Examining Natural Mentoring Relationships (NMRs) among Self-Identified Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (GBQ) Male Youth

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Abstract

Scholars have identified the presence of natural mentoring relationships (NMRs) as one of a set of protective factors that promote and protect the health and well-being of “at-risk” and marginalized youth. While this work has informed our understanding of the importance of NMRs for supporting youth and promoting positive development, it has only just begun to extend its inquiry focus onto the lives of same-sex attracted (SSA) youth (e.g., gay and bisexual youth). Thirty-nine in-depth interviews with self-identified gay, bisexual, and questioning (GBQ) male youth (ages 15 – 22) were qualitatively analyzed for the presence, form, and function of NMRs. Results from this inquiry revealed that participants identified a diverse range of “natural mentors” and that the provision of social support was of thematic prominence in these relationships. Results from this effort are here presented. Clinical and programming implications, as well as directions for future work are discussed.

Keywords

natural mentoring; social support; gay; adolescents

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1. Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period with long-term implications for the individual and for society as a whole. The importance of this period has prompted researchers to ask, “What serves to protect and promote the development, health, and well-being of youth (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Garnezy, 1990; Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001)?” Long recognized as important to promoting positive development during adolescence (e.g., reduced delinquency and positive educational and health outcomes) (Baker & Maguire, 2005; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005a, 2005b; Hamilton & Darling, 1996; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002), the study of natural mentoring relationships (NMRs), or supportive, nurturing interpersonal dyads that develop without the auspices of a formal program (Baker & Maguire, 2005; Bennets, 2003), is helping to answer this critical question.

Research convincingly documents that due to pervasive heterosexist social frameworks and persistent homophobia, many same-sex attracted (SSA) youth (e.g., gay and bisexual youth) face serious threats to the attainment of optimal development during adolescence (Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006; Harper & Schneider, 2003; Kitts, 2005). For example, SSA youth who disclose their sexual attraction and/or identity (i.e., “come out”) may experience family rejection and social isolation (Gould, Greenberg, Velting, & Shaffer, 2003; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanches, 2009) that in turn may contribute to a number of negative health outcomes, including depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation and behavior (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Jenne, & Marin, 2001; Meyer (1995). While this and related lines of research (Warren, Fernández, Harper, Hidalgo, Jamil, & Torres, 2008) inform our understanding of the developmental risks faced by this population, we know arguably less about the factors that may support these youth and promote positive development outcomes during adolescence.

Given what is known about the positive impact of NMRs in the lives of other “at-risk” or marginalized youth (e.g., young African American mothers and urban youth) (Klaw, Rhodes, & Fitzgerald, 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2002), extending our inquiry regarding these relationships onto the lives of SSA youth is an overdue target of research. To our knowledge, only one published study has formally examined these NMRs in the lives of SSA youth (Gastic & Johnson, 2009). The current study was designed to address the paucity of research in this area by learning from SSA male youth about the presence, form, and function of NMRs in their lives. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) When you first started to identify as GBQ, who was helpful and supportive in this process?; and 2) Other than your parent, has there been an important person in your life, who is older and more experienced than you and who has provided you with guidance and support as a GBQ individual?

1.1 Background

Research in NMRs has attempted to characterize the prevalence, form, and function of these relationships (Hamilton & Darling, 1996; Rhodes, Contreras, & Mangelsdorf, 1994). Sánchez and Reyes (1999), for example, provided a description of NMRs in the lives of 160 Latino adolescents. According to the authors, 78% of surveyed youth reported a natural mentor, with 71% of these youth identifying a family member in this role. Additional findings indicated that female participants were twice as likely to report NMRs as were male participants and that the provision emotional support was a strong interpersonal facet to these relationships. The identification of family members as mentors buttressed findings elsewhere the literature indicating that NMRs generally take place within a youth's social system and that youth establish mentoring relationships with a variety of individuals,

including relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, religious leaders, and peers (Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, & Bontempo, 2000; Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

In addition to prevalence and form, investigators have also focused on the connection between NMRs and varied developmental outcomes (Beam, et al., 2002; Cavell, Meehan, Heffer, & Holladay, 2002; Chen, Greenberger, Farruggia, Dong, 2003; Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002; Klaw et al., 2003). In work with pregnant and parenting African American female youth, Rhodes, Ebert, & Fischer (1992) associated the presence of NMRs with decreased depressive symptoms, more positive attitudes toward career attainment, and greater life optimism. The authors suggested that mentors, 85% of whom were female and 42% of whom were relatives, may have helped participants extract helpful support from others who then buffered participants against difficult life stressors. More recently, Zimmerman and colleagues (2002) reported on the compensatory and protective effects of having a natural mentor in a study of 770 mostly African American youth. Participants who identified NMRs also reported: 1) less marijuana use; 2) fewer nonviolent delinquent behaviors; 3) higher levels of school attachment and school efficacy; and 4) believing more strongly in the importance of doing well in school.

While we have learned a great deal about NMRs in the lives of varied “at-risk” or marginalized youth, formal study of NMRs in the lives of SSA youth is almost completely lacking. To date, only one published study has specifically examined these relationships on the lives of SSA youth (Gastic & Johnson, 2009). In their work examining the benefits of informal mentoring on the “educational resilience” of sexual minority youth, Gastic & Johnson (2009), showed that having a mentor, especially one that is a teacher, was associated with higher levels of post-secondary participation for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. The authors note that teacher-mentors are particularly significant to the educational resilience of sexual minority women of color, who, unfortunately, were least likely to be mentored by teachers. Overall, this work underscore the urgency of understanding how school- and community-based mentoring efforts can better meet and respond to the needs of SSA youth, especially SSA female youth.

The lack of empirical evidence regarding NMRs vis-à-vis SSA youth is undoubtedly due to a host of factors, not the least of which is the historic emphasis on the problems faced by this population instead of a systematic consideration of their individual strengths or the socio-cultural mechanisms through which positive developmental outcomes may be attained (Savin-Williams, 2005). The gap in the literature is particularly striking given the well-documented developmental challenges faced by many SSA youth (e.g., verbal and physical assault, social isolation, familial and peer rejection, and high risk sexual behavior) (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Harper & Schneider, 2004; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002), for example, reported that SSA youth who reported high levels of school victimization also reported higher levels of substance use, suicidality, and sexual risk behaviors than their other-sex attracted counterparts who also reported high levels of school victimization.

Understanding naturally occurring relationships that may serve to offset the adverse developmental challenges faced by many SSA youth may serve to inform programming practicing, as some SSA youth may find formal mentoring programs hostile to or even rejecting of their sexual identity (Beadle, 2002). Learning about naturally occurring relationships that promote positive developmental outcomes among SSA male youth may be particularly useful to intervention efforts aimed at addressing the higher rates of HIV infection and AIDS among ethnic minority SSA male youth (Wolitski, Valdiserri, Denning, & Levine, 2001). In the study that follows, we utilize a strengths or resilience perspective to

examine self-nominated natural mentors to the lives of self-identified gay, bisexual, and questioning (GBQ) Latino, African American, and European American male youth.

2. Method

2.1 Introduction

This present effort was part of a larger multi-site, mixed-methods study based in Chicago and Miami that explored the relationship between the development of identities (gay, ethnic, and masculine) and HIV risk and protective behaviors among African American, Latino, and European American male youth ages 14-22. The present qualitative effort examined data from a subset of participants from Chicago who met the following criteria for the larger study: 1) biological male; 2) 14 to 22 year old; 3) self-identify as African American, Hispanic/Latino, or White non-Hispanic/European American; 4) self-identify as GBQ; 5) have no knowledge of being HIV positive; 6) Chicago metropolitan area residence; and 7) English fluency. Because not enough is known about NMRs in the lives of SSA youth and because our research questions aimed to learn about participants' experiences with NMRs and the meaning they ascribe to these relationships, adoption of qualitative methods over more traditional or quantitative methodology was undertaken (Patton, 2002, p.33; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.11).

2.2 Participants

Participants were 39 African American ($n = 11$), Latino ($n = 13$), and European American ($n = 15$) male youth from Chicago who self-identified as gay ($n = 28$), bisexual ($n = 7$), or questioning ($n = 3$) and who were between the ages of 15 and 22 at time of recruitment ($M = 19$ years; $SD = 3.43$). "Questioning" is a label used by individuals who acknowledge their SSA but who are either not ready or firmly opposed to the traditional labels, such as gay or bisexual (Hollander, 2000). Data from one of the 39 participants was not analyzed because the data suggested the emergence of a transgender identity.

2.3 Procedure

A non-probability, convenience sampling technique was used to recruit participants for the larger study from Chicago community-based agencies and venues frequented by SSA male youth. This technique is appropriate for research aimed at working with under-represented populations (Patton, 2002). Once eligibility was established and informed consent/assent was obtained, participants completed a self-administered questionnaire in a private setting. Parental consent was waived by the Institution Review Board at the sponsoring university. A total of 97 participants completed the questionnaire.

Data from the questionnaire were used to create a purposive, stratified sampling frame from which to select participants for the second, or qualitative, phase of the larger study. In order to account for developmental and sociocultural variance, the frame was stratified by age (14-17, 18-20, and 21-22), level of GBQ sexual identity (low and high), and ethnicity (African-American, European American, and Latino). Two to six weeks following the questionnaire, selected participants were contacted for participation in an in-depth semi-structured interview. Participants were advised that the interview would take approximately 2 hours and that \$35 would be their compensation. A total of 39 qualitative interviews were completed.

2.4 Data Collection

The in-depth interviews were conducted by an ethnically diverse research staff of self-identified SSA doctoral graduate students and PhD-level researchers with significant research, academic, and personal histories with the target population. The interviews took

place in private offices at the recruitment site or the sponsoring university. In order to safeguard against identity disclosure, participants were urged to use a pseudonyms. At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed using a standardized protocol that included procedures for handling emergency situations and/or making mental health referrals. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. These transcriptions were reviewed by members of the research for the larger study to ensure fidelity before being entered into NVivo software for analysis. Numerical identifiers were assigned to each interview to protect confidentiality.

2.5 Instruments

Qualitative Interview Guide—This instrument was developed by the research team for the larger study through an iterative group process over the course of three months. Grounded in phenomenological and constructivist frameworks, the guide provided a general structure for discussion while allowing interviewed participants to provide their own definitions of queried constructs, based on their life experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2002, p. 21). The guide examined five topics: 1) masculine identity; 2) ethnic/racial identity; 3) sexual identity; 4) the integration of identities; and 5) high-risk behavior. NMR questions were embedded into the section on sexual identity.

Natural Mentoring Question(s)—Developed by the first and third authors, interviewed participants were asked two questions: 1) When you first started to identify as GBQ, who was helpful and supportive in this process?; and 2) Other than your parent, has there been an important person in your life, who is older and more experienced than you and who has provided you with guidance and support as a GBQ individual? The second question is more in keeping with how NMRs have been conceptualized in the literature (Zimmerman, et al, 2002, 2005). To limit leading or biasing interviewed participants, the word “mentor” was not used in the interview process. Participants who identified a NMR were then asked to describe the relationship, including who this person was, what activities they engaged in, and why this person was important, helpful, and/or supportive.

2.6 Data Analysis

In order to allow for themes and patterns to emerge from the data, analyses were primarily inductive (Patton, 2002, Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, to account for what we already knew about NMRs we also employed deductive analysis. For example, Rhodes (2002) suggests that learning about the specific activities in which mentor-mentees engage is important to our understanding of these relationships, and analyses included exploration of this relational facet.

Analysis began with a reading of all interviews by the first author to develop familiarity with the data. A second, more focused, reading was then undertaken by both the first and second authors with relative mindfulness of the research questions. Marginal notes and preliminary thematic and pattern codes were discussed by the first and second authors in order to gain understanding of how different people might look at the data, amalgamate varying and competing interpretations, and remain open to competing ideas (i.e., researcher triangulation).

Once a code set was developed, these were used to examine the data a third time to ensure validity of codes. Code amending, or development, characterized data analysis throughout the present effort (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Thus, initial codes were amended, new ones created, and transcripts re-examined in order to ensure they were coded accurately and completely (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.7 Credibility of findings

A criterion for evaluating the quality of qualitative investigations is the credibility of findings, which is the extent to which findings reflect the participants' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To assure this credibility, three validation checks were performed for the larger study. Completed after half the interview for the larger study were completed, the first check involved “member-checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with three youth who had completed the quantitative phase of the larger study but not the qualitative phase. Emergent themes and patterns were presented and feedback was solicited. The second “check,” involved the same process, but instead of three youth, the themes and patterns were presented to three adults with extensive professional experience with GBQ male youth. Feedback from these “checks” was incorporated into the interview protocol for the remaining half of the interviews. With all interviews completed, the third and final validation check took place, during which 13 of the 39 interviewed participants were asked to verify all themes and pattern codes.

3. Findings

Data analyses revealed two overarching themes: 1) NMR diversity and 2) provision of social support. Excerpts from the transcribed interviews are presented to illustrate these themes, as well as other findings. Participants' responses are in normal font. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

3.1 NMR Diversity

Most study participants identified a NMR. Identified natural mentors included individuals typically associated with this role (e.g., teachers, coaches, school nurses, counselors, and neighbors), as well those less typically associated with the same (e.g., siblings, romantic partners, and peers).

My one friend, Abigail, she's straight...she's always been very supportive...I was able to go talk to her about who I thought was cute. Like we'd go boy shopping. *And how is something like that helpful?* Because I'm able to be who I am...and say, oh, look at that cute guy. I can't say that with some of my friends...I could talk to her about it...being gay. (Joel, European American, gay, 18 yrs. old)

Professionals, or individuals who are in a position or setting conducive to establishing and developing NMRs (e.g., a high school) but whose job title does not necessarily include this responsibility, figured prominently among identified mentors.

She's the coordinator of the community agency...She didn't ask me any questions. She's never been like, so ARE you? She never forced me to label... and she was the person who really supported my, my being queer for the longest time. (Robert, European American, gay, 20 yrs. old)

3.1.1 Natural Mentor Terms—Asked what term they would use to describe their identified natural mentor, participants used a range of terms, from the expected (e.g., mentor, confidant, role model, and parental figure), to the unexpected (e.g., guardian angel, and Obi Wan).

I suppose “role model” or a “savior,” something like that. She's just like a parent... but not like being a parent. (Pete, European American, questioning, 18 yrs. old)

I think he was he was very supportive, like a guardian angel, when I need him, during my breakup, and for a lot of different other things. (José, Latino, gay, 22 yrs. old)

3.1.2. Natural Mentor Demographics—Participants who identified a natural mentor were asked to describe this person. Examination of the data revealed no pattern regarding age, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identity.

Um, the person who I first told I was gay was my biggest mentor and she's not even gay. Um we just talked, and she convinced me that I was normal and that it was okay and there was nothing wrong with me and she was so accepting of me and she talked about me (John, Latino, bisexual, 17 yrs. old)

Although the literature on NMRs suggests that a natural mentor is someone who is typically older than mentees (Rhodes, 2005); participants identified individuals from a broad range of ages, including same-age peers.

Um, when I first met him, I was 15, 16 years old and he was 45, 44? And he was in a relationship with a monogamous partner. He was a mentor to me. (Pete, European American, gay, 18 yrs. old)

3.1.3. NMRs and Context—Most NMRs emerged during the course of “normative” development and within contexts typically associated with fostering and encouraging of a positive outcome for youth (e.g., school).

So she helped you start a GSA? Yeah. She's a strong supporter. She's a great person. She listens. She knows like, she gives great advice. She, it's really great to like listen to her advice, because she actually knows the things you go through. She's a lesbian. (Pedro, Latino, gay, 19 yrs. old)

3.2. Social Support

Social support emerged as a major theme in both a broader definitional sense (i.e., relationships that offered guidance and encouragement) and in a more differentiated manner (e.g., emotional, informational, self-appraisal, and unconditional support).

3.2.1. Social Support in General—Participants revealed key definitional components of social support, including guidance, instruction, reassurance, and encouragement (Barrera & Bonds, 2005).

He was someone who I looked up to as like a father-like figure...who had more experience and understanding...Like if I had questions about being gay, I could talk to him and ask questions and not feel silly or stupid. (Joey, Latino, gay, 21 yrs. old, Latino)

He told me to check out [Community Based Organization] and...I did. And from there it pretty much opened a lot of stuff up to me, realizing that I'm not alone. There's other people out there, other youth...That pretty much showed me the ropes. (21 yr. old, African American, gay male)

3.2.2. Emotional Support—Participants discussed interpersonal exchanges characterized by the provision of empathy, care, concern, and attentive listening (i.e., emotional support) (Barrera & Bonds, 2005) as key relational features of their identified NMRs.

I came out to him. I felt that I was at a point where even though he knew, that it was a big deal for me to say the words to him-I'm gay... I felt very trustworthy of him... I feel that I can still go to him for, for any kind of concerns...he's somebody that I value as ...a mentor. (Ken, Latino, gay, 19 yrs. old)

She's a great person. She listens...she gives great advice...because she actually knows the things you go through...you know she cares ... I've always seen her like a guardian...she watches over me. (Jonah, European American, gay, 17 yrs. old)

3.2.3. Informational Support—Participants discussed the provision of unsolicited advice and information to cope with personal and environmental challenges, including information related to safer sex practices and HIV.

I did have a mentor growing up... [he] protected me um, from a lot of the like “vices”...I had someone take me under their wing and like kind of teach me that there were certain things that I needed to know, to be aware of, and not to go down the wrong path. (Kyle, European American, gay, 22 yrs. old)

I had a lifelong friend...older than me...gave me, like advice, go protect yourself, HIV awareness, go get checked out...it's like they beat it into me so much that now I do get checked up on a regular [basis]. (John, Latino, gay, 21 yrs. old)

The provision of information meant to promote vigilance vis-à-vis homophobic backlash was particularly significant for a number of participants.

I told [my mentor] about my sexual gender and he was like, well, it's fine to be what you are, but in a way, it's just not cool to express yourself just to ANYBODY...some people don't just feel comfortable with people that are of a different gender from theirs...I gradually began to grasp and understand what I should... be careful. (Ty, African American, gay, 21 yrs. old)

3.2.4. Self-Appraisal Support—This type of support appeared as both implicit and explicit messages that allowed participants to reframe their SSA sexual as something positive.

She helped me be more confident into who I am...She told me like it does not matter who I like-that my sexuality matters. That was good for me. (Mika, European American, gay, 17 yrs. old)

I think [my mentor] helped me a lot, because ever since I, like before, I was all really depressed and stuff, but when I started knowing him, it's all been good...I got to know about the bisexual thing...and now I am, hey I'm bisexual and I think it's cool. (Brandon, Latino, bisexual, 16 yrs. old)

3.2.5. Unconditional Support—Finally, several participants said that being “unconditionally accepted” was the most important thing that their mentor did for them.

They love me regardless...they support me whenever I need support. Even if I'm not there or I don't call in a while, I can call back and they'll be there for me. They have the unconditional love... (European American, gay, 17 yrs. old)

When I first started liking girls and boys, she was just like, it happens...You like who you like ...She's never been like, so what ARE you? She never forced me to make any decisions. She was just always supportive in whatever I did. And she was, the person who really supported my, my being queer for the longest time. (Pete, European American, queer, 18 yrs. old)

3.3. NMRs and Activities

There was some insight into the activities in which some participants engaged with their natural mentors. Participants discussed school-based group activities (e.g., Gay Student Alliances), as well as community-based events (e.g., Pride Parade) as important experiential

pieces of their NMRs. Companionship and exchanges around mutual interests appeared as important activities.

One of the counselors at the community agency has been really helpful, because we talked about the same issues...They [natural mentor and domestic partner] opened up their homes and I can go there to watch movies or play video games. They're pretty cool, actually. Yeah. *Do you trust them?* Yeah, with everything. (Brion, African American, bisexual, 17 yrs. old)

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn about the presence, form, and function of NMRs in the lives of self-identified GBQ male youth. Findings from this qualitative effort offer valuable, but preliminary, insight into the makeup of these naturally occurring relationships and the impact they may have on the lives of SSA male youth. The use of a convenience sample allowed us to focus on a subset of this under-studied population. Overall, data suggest that when considering natural mentors, SSA male youth are likely to identify a variety of individuals in this role and that the provision of a typology of support (e.g., social, emotional, and unconditional support) is likely to emerge as a key relational feature.

The results of the present effort are consistent with the view in the literature that NMRs promote favorable development for "at risk" youth (Beier et al, 2000; Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998; Rhodes et al., 1994; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, in press). However, from a methodological perspective this work differs from earlier work by its focus on self-identified GBQ male youth. The significance of this study is twofold: 1) it addresses a significant gap in the literature on NMRs and 2) its findings challenge the traditional negative or deficit-based perspective on SSA male youth.

For the last three decades, clinical and professional conceptualizations of SSA youth have generally been that they represent an inherently weak, vulnerable, and socially isolated group (Bagley & D'Augelli, 2000). Although this earlier work has legitimized the pain and suffering of many non-heterosexual youth, it has, inadvertently, obscured the possibility that these youth may also be strong, resilient, and socially connected. The present effort contributes to a more balanced portrait of GBQ male youth by reminding us of the naturally occurring supportive and nurturing relational network that suggest something other than social isolation.

While learning that most study participants identified at least one NMR is encouraging, this finding must be interpreted with caution as there are possible confounding factors that may explain it. For example, social desirability and/or the use of a self-nominating technique that differs from work done elsewhere (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005) may account for both the number and variety of identified "mentors." While one can argue that at this preliminary stage of inquiry regarding NMRs among SSA youth, the belief that one has had a supportive and nurturing relationship may be more important than the "validity" of the identified relational construct, the importance of attaining definitional consensus regarding what is meant by a natural mentor is of critical importance. Should we, for example, consider same-age SSA peers as natural mentors for SSA male youth? Future work where both SSA male youth mentees and identified mentors are interviewed may prove useful in gaining convergence regarding the construct of NMRs.

The variety of identified natural mentors, specifically of individuals not traditionally associated with this role (e.g., more experienced and knowledgeable SSA peers), underscores the importance of examining additional individuals who may be influential in the lives of SSA male youth. Findings from this study suggest that for SSA male youth

growing up within a social framework that limits opportunities for open expression of personal information (e.g., that one is attracted to one's same sex), SSA peer "mentors" are in a unique position to offset this limitation by providing SSA youth the opportunity for open expression about their sexual identity. This finding not only underscores the accepted developmental tenet that an adolescent's peer group represents a primary context for the consolidation of identity (Steinberg, 1993), but suggests that SSA peer mentors function in a unique compensatory role for SSA male youth who have less history or experience as SSA youth. The present study does not offer a detailed understanding of this hypothesized compensatory role and future work is here needed.

Identified NMRs with non-related adults (e.g., neighbors, counselors, and teachers) underscores the positive impact that individuals in these roles can play in the lives of "at-risk" youth (Klaw et al., 2003; Rhodes, 2002). In concert with the work of Gastic and Johnson (2009), our findings indicate that teachers, counselors, and other school-based personnel are among the most valued adults in the lives of SSA male youth. Findings further indicate that SSA school personnel are in a particularly powerful position from which to mentor SSA youth, by off-setting the limited availability and/or contact that some SSA youth have with positive SSA role models. Identified school-based mentors challenge the idea that schools are, as a whole, neglecting, unwelcoming, and even hostile setting for SSA youth (Kosciw, 2003). Study participants suggest that school is both a viable and supportive setting for SSA youth, particularly when key school personnel are committed to challenging homophobia and heterosexism.

Reminding us of the importance of erotic and romantic development during adolescence (Steinberg, 1998), the identification of romantic partners within the context of NMRs was an unexpected finding. The argument can be made that given the increased need for support faced by many SSA male youth, finding nurturance and guidance from anyone is a good thing. However, care needs to be exercised in interpreting and applying this finding. The data do not indicate that romantic partners should be recruited by formal mentoring programs. At best, our findings suggest that formal mentoring programs for SSA male youth should attend to all aspects of development, including romantic and erotic development. Because many SSA youth lack models of healthy same-sex relationships (Bohan, 1996), they may have difficulty merging a growing need for emotional intimacy with their sexual/erotic desires. Careful guidance of this aspect development can be informed by more detailed investigation of health-promoting and positive romantic, erotic, and sexual relationships among SSA male youth.

Underscoring the intimate relationship between mentoring and social support (Barrera & Bonds, 2005), data from the present study indicated, time and time again, that social support represents a key feature of NMRs in the lives of study participants. However, beyond speaking to the construct of social support, in general, participants referenced a typology of support (i.e., emotional, informational, self-appraisal, and unconditional). The importance of this finding rests not so much in our being reminded that the provision of social support is important in the lives of SSA male youth, but that in order to gain a stronger understanding of how this construct matters we need to consider a typology of support.

Emotional support was the most frequently referenced type of support among study participants. Participants discussed their NMRs in terms of a close, caring, and validating relationship that offered them opportunities to both express and receive love-key variables for the development of identity, self-worth and self-esteem (Steinberg, 1998). Erikson's (1968) conception of identity suggests a balance between the way individuals see themselves and the way others see them. Healthy identity consolidation would entail the synthesis of these two processes. However, due in great part to a pervasive heterosexual

social framework and intransigent homophobia, many SSA youth may experience conflict between these processes. That is, their intrapersonal identity and interpersonal identity may be divergent (e.g., they are gay and don't feel bad, but are told by society that being gay is bad). Data from the present study suggest that identified NMRs served to offset this identity imbalance through the provision of self-appraisal social support (i.e., they were told, directly and indirectly, that being gay, bisexual, or questioning was okay). These findings suggest that to understand the relationship between social support and positive development among SSA male youth, it may be first necessary to articulate what kind of social support is being examined.

4.1. Implications

The present effort has a number of programming and clinical implications. The results of this study suggest that formal programming efforts with SSA youth can be enhanced by incorporating natural mentor relationships into typical provision of service. For example, mentor interventions with SSA youth can support NMRs in their efforts to support and promote optimal development in their target population.

Our findings further suggest that strict adherence to ideas about who can, or should mentor SSA male youth may be premature. Findings from the present effort suggest that having someone knowledgeable and experienced who provides social and other support may be more important to SSA male youth than having someone who is older and/or also SSA. Similarly, finding from this study give notice to program developers regarding the presumption that only SSA adults should serve as mentors of SSA youth. While SSA adults certainly may have insight into many of the unique developmental challenges facing SSA youth, finding from the present study suggests that having a NMR with someone who is understanding, is supportive, and validating of a SSA identity may be more important to SSA male youth than having a mentor who is also SSA.

The repeated emergence of a typology of social support suggests that formalized mentoring efforts with SSA male should facilitate the provision of directional, instructional, emotional, self-appraisal, and unconditional support in both naturally occurring and formal mentoring relationships. This can be done through training of mentors regarding the provision of validation and support of mentees, for example. Finally, formal mentoring program may benefit from partnerships with institutions that are well-suited for establishing NMRs (e.g., school) and the integration of familial inter-generational interaction. Interventionist should neither assume that schools are inhospitable and invalidating environment for SSA youth nor that formal mentoring relationship should supplant parental relationships.

With regard to clinical implications, mental health professionals should adopt a less deficit-based framework vis-à-vis SSA male youth. This shift in perspective will allow mental health providers to better appreciate and more successfully promote the relational network that may serve to promote health and well-being of these youth. In addition, mental health professional should encourage activities that are broadly structured to provide a full(er) spectrum of social support, including emotional, instruction, information, self-appraisal, and “unconditional” among those nurturing and supportive relationships in the lives of SSA youth.

4.2. Limitations

Although this study offers a first step in the examination of NMRs among SSA youth, it has important limitations. The following limitations suggest implications for future research.

First, constricted by the purpose of the larger study, this study provides an initial and cursory examination of NMRs in the lives of SSA male youth. Future more in-depth examination

and independent efforts regarding the presence, form, and function of NMRs in the lives of this population is needed. For example, a more detailed and singular effort can inform us about the duration of NMRs in the lives of SSA youth. Research with non-SSA youth indicates that NMRs that endure for several years appear to have the strongest benefit for youth (Dubois & Silverton, 2005; Klaw et al., 2003). Programming efforts that target SSA youth would benefit from learning from research whether this finding extends to mentoring with SSA youth, or where and how this might differ.

Second, with a focus on urban, self-identified GBQ male youth involved with community-based organizations (CBOs), the present effort may only reflect NMRs as understood and experienced by this subset of GBA male youth. NMR research is needed with other sub-sets of SSA youth, including SSA male youth who do not make use of CBOs and those living in rural areas. To our knowledge there is no published work on NMRs and SSA female youth (e.g., lesbian and bisexual females) or gender variant youth. The presumption that findings from this study can or should be extended to these other SSA youth populations is to be avoided. Although our sample non-representative, our study offers new information that is consistent with and builds on previous research, and suggests several important strategies for how to better serve all SSA youth.

Third, as a cross-sectional effort, the present effort presents is a remembered and limited slice of the developmental trajectory of NMRs in the lives of SSA male youth. Prospective longitudinal work is needed if interventionists are ever to design formal mentoring programs that are in sync with the distinctive developmental needs and challenges at different time periods for this underserved population.

Fifth, the present cannot speak to the relationship between NMRs and specific health risks in the lives of study participants. Research that goes beyond identifying the presence or absence of natural mentors to that linking presence with specific outcomes is needed. Work that examines the impact of NMRs relative to health threatening behaviors, including drug and alcohol use and high-risk sexual behaviors is urgently needed.

In conclusion, research has cogently documented that due to pervasive homophobia and heterosexist social systems many SSA youth face serious challenges to the attainment of optimal development during adolescence (Harper & Schneider, 2003). The literature also documents that many youth considered to be “at risk” for a less than optimal developmental outcome, benefit from the presence, support, and nurturance of naturally occurring mentoring relationship (Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005). The present effort suggests that the study of NMRs holds promise for identifying and understanding a relational construct that may minimize negative developmental outcomes among this underserved population and inform formal mentoring intervention efforts to more intimately mirror relationship that are already beneficial to SSA youth. The authors are encouraged by these findings and look forward to growth in this investigative area.

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