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Youth Mentoring Relationships in Context: Mentor Perceptions of Youth, Environment, and the Mentor Role

Davielle Lakind^a, Marc Atkins^b, and J. Mark Eddy^c

^aUniversity of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology (M/C 285) 1007 W. Harrison Street Chicago, IL 60607

^bUniversity of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychiatry (M/C 747) Institute for Juvenile Research 1747 W. Roosevelt Rd., Rm. 155 Chicago, IL 60608 atkins@uic.edu

^cPartners for Our Children School of Social Work, University of Washington UW Mailbox 359476 Seattle, WA 98195-9476 jmarke@uw.edu

Abstract

Youth mentoring is primarily understood as a relationship between mentor and mentee, yet mentors often enter into home, school, and other community settings associated with youth they serve, and interact regularly with other people in mentees' lives. Understanding *how* and *why* mentors negotiate their role as they do remains underexplored, especially in relation to these environmental elements. This qualitative study drew on structured interviews conducted with professional mentors ($N = 9$) serving youth at risk for adjustment problems to examine how mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentee environments informed their sense of how they fulfilled the mentoring role. Mentors commonly characterized problems youth displayed as byproducts of adverse environments, and individual-level strengths as existing "in spite of" environmental inputs. Perceptions of mentees and their environments informed mentors' role conceptualizations, with some mentors seeing themselves as antidotes to environmental adversity. Mentors described putting significant time and effort into working closely with other key individuals as well as one-on-one with mentees because they identified considerable environmental need; however, extra-dyadic facets of their roles were far less clearly defined or supported. They described challenges associated with role overload and opaque role boundaries, feeling unsupported by other adults in mentees' lives, and frustrated by the prevalence of risks. Community-based mentoring represents a unique opportunity to connect with families, but mentors must be supported around the elements of their roles that extend beyond mentor-mentee relationships in order to capitalize more fully on the promise of the intervention.

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Corresponding Author: lakin3@uic.edu Phone: (413) 218-1395 Fax: (312) 413-0214.

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Keywords

Mentoring; Youth; Qualitative Research; Community-Based Intervention; Families

1. Introduction

Youth mentoring is broadly defined as an individualized, supportive relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult that promotes positive development (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Keller & Pryce, 2010), but mentors are also members of mentees' social networks, and many interact with other members of these networks (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013). Great within-program variability in mentoring practices and intervention effectiveness (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011) may be fueled in part by the high level of discretion and latitude allowed mentors in order to insure that mentoring is responsive to each child's needs, strengths, and interests. This means that mentors' perceptions of the youth they serve can dramatically inform the shape their mentoring takes. Although a growing literature considers the complexity of the mentoring role (e.g., Goldner & Mayseless, 2008; Keller & Pryce, 2010; Morrow & Styles, 1995), understanding *how* and *why* mentors negotiate their role as they do remains little explored or understood.

The current study builds on a prior study (Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014) examining the conceptualizations of "professional" youth mentors (mentors serving in a long-term full-time salaried capacity) who worked with rosters of youth perceived to be at heightened risk for adjustment problems and negative life outcomes. In that study, we focused on how serving in a professional capacity affected how mentors conceptualized their role, as well as how they viewed the program model and organizational structure. The current study used the same set of interview transcripts to examine mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentee environments, and their descriptions of the mentoring role in light of these youth and environment-related conceptualizations.

1.1 Mentor Perceptions and Role Fulfillment

Given its inherent flexibility, mentors' perceptions of the role they fulfill can affect the course and outcome of the intervention in many ways. Mentors have reported that their decisions to terminate relationships after a short time have stemmed from the gap between their expectations and subsequent experiences (Spencer, 2007). Morrow and Styles (1995) demonstrated that dissimilar mentoring approaches within one program were differentially associated with youth and mentor relationship satisfaction as well as relationship length.

Mentors' perceptions of their mentees can also influence their mentoring approach. Drawing on concepts of social expectancies and self-fulfilling prophecies in a study of a school-based mentoring program, Karcher, Davidson, Rhodes, and Herrera (2010) found that academically disconnected mentees partnered with older teen mentors who reported more positive attitudes toward youth were more emotionally engaged in their mentoring relationships, and ultimately developed stronger relationships with their teachers, than disconnected mentees with more negative mentors. Herrera, DuBois, and Grossman (2013)

found that mentors matched with youth with relatively high levels of individual and environmental-level risks engaged in activities targeting character/behavior change (e.g., developing social skills) more often than mentors matched with mentees with lower risk profiles. Mentors matched with these highest risk youth were also least likely to solicit input from their mentees about activities.

In combination, this body of evidence suggests that the choices mentors make in response to their perceptions of their mentees can have tangible consequences on relationships and youth outcomes. Given that mentors have such latitude in crafting their mentoring approach, and that perceptions and approaches can meaningfully influence outcomes, examining the phenomenology of mentoring can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of mentoring program effects.

1.2 Mentoring Relationships in Context

Though the growth of the field and proliferation of program models has expanded the number and characteristics of youth receiving mentoring, formal mentoring programs most often target youth living in areas characterized by a relative lack of organizational and institutional resources, and by the presence of considerable community-level risk (DuBois et al., 2011). Stressors associated with poverty – for example, unstable housing, employment, and family composition; stressful life events and daily hassles; and increased exposure to crime and violence – place children at increased risk for behavioral, emotional, and academic struggles (Borofsky, Kellerman, Baucom, Oliver, & Margolin, 2013; McCoy, Roy, & Sirkman, 2013; Schwartz and Gorman, 2003). Youth facing these stressors who become involved in mentoring relationships may exhibit behaviors or needs that mentors find challenging or frustrating; mentors matched with youth at relatively high individual-level risk have indeed reported greater difficulty dealing with behavior and concerns related to youth's social and emotional issues (Herrera et al., 2013). With so many children assigned to mentoring programs precisely because they present with heightened risk profiles that may negatively impact on relationship-building, examining how mentors describe the strategies they employ and the perceptions they hold regarding their relationships with youth who demonstrate these risks may elicit better understanding of factors associated with relationship quality with children with whom it may be challenging to work.

1.3 Mentors' Involvement With Contextual Factors

Mentors may also face unique challenges posed by mentees' homes, schools, and communities. In Herrera et al.'s (2013) study, mentors working with youth with heightened environmental risks noted difficulties connecting with and getting support from youth's families, meeting with youth consistently, and navigating social service systems. Older adults mentoring high-risk youth identified mentees' difficult life circumstances, fear of youths' neighborhoods, and the challenge of balancing mentors' relationships with youth and their families as salient stressors (Rogers & Taylor, 1997). Mentors involved in failed relationships described feeling overwhelmed by the difficult circumstances faced by youth and their families (Spencer, 2007). Further, some professional mentors who worked with youth in schools described challenges related to feeling "pressured" by some parents to serve as quasi-parents themselves, while others sensed that some parents felt threatened by

their relationships with youth (Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006). Because of the significant challenges associated with working with families, some researchers and practitioners have adopted a view that the interaction between mentors parents and families, and family involvement in mentoring relationships, should be limited (Miller, 2007; Morrow & Styles, 1995).

Environmental factors, however, are not always and only risk factors for youth or barriers to mentoring. Keller (2005) emphasizes that parents play a critical role in the mentoring process. His "Systems Theory of Mentoring" (2005) highlights the importance of including key individuals beyond the mentor and mentee in a mentoring intervention, such as parents and caseworkers. Keller and Blakeslee (2013) introduce social network theory as a valuable lens for examining the effects of mentoring beyond the dyad and illustrate the web of relationships that can develop within the context of a mentor-mentee pairing, including between mentors and parents, school personnel, and community members. Parents have described expending considerable effort to nurture their children's mentor-mentee relationships (Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011), and staff members from mentoring programs with explicit family engagement strategies have said parental involvement is critical to the success of mentoring matches (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). DuBois et al.'s first meta-analysis (2002) found stronger positive outcomes for youth involved in programs with a parent involvement component, and Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch (2000) found that improvements in parent-child relationships partially mediated the association between mentoring and a number of positive youth outcomes, including global self-worth, school value, and grades. These findings indicate that parents and other key individuals in mentees' lives may make unique and critical contributions to the youth mentoring endeavor, even when risks or challenges are also present.

As Spencer and Basualdo-Delmonico (2014) have noted, the trend in youth mentoring to focus exclusively on the mentor-mentee relationship is in contrast to considerable evidence for positive effects of involving families as co-interventionists and addressing the needs of both children and families in intervention and prevention programs for high-risk children and youth (Cappella, Frazier, Atkins, Schoenwald, & Glisson, 2008; Farahmand et al., 2012; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003, as cited in Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). More broadly, the value of parent involvement towards improved child outcomes has been established across service modalities, from clinic-based psychotherapy (Dowell & Ogles, 2010) to schooling (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Fantuzzo, Davis, & Ginsburg, 1995; Jeynes, 2005). For children from challenging environments, however, the importance of attending to contextual factors may be heightened. For example, a meta-analysis of community-based mental health and behavioral programs for low-income urban youth (Farahmand et al., 2012) found the strongest effects for programs that were environmentally based, and nonsignificant effects for programs that did not target the environment.

In parallel with Farahmand et al.'s findings, Taylor and Porcellini (2013) hypothesize that it may be precisely when youth experience challenging family or community environments that mentoring alone, isolated from children's larger ecological issues, does not achieve optimal effects. Given this potential, it is unfortunate that there are few studies that go

beyond the dyadic interpersonal relationship between mentor and mentee to examine other important dynamics, such as mentors' perspectives regarding their relationships with other adults in their mentees' lives as well as other community influences. A related and equally unexplored area is how mentors' interpretation and negotiation of their mentees' environments may relate to their ongoing relationships with mentees or other individuals in mentees' lives. Indeed, we have encountered no other studies that examine mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentee contextual factors in order to better understand their role fulfillment and experiences as mentors, especially regarding the facets of their roles that extend beyond their dyadic relationships and into mentees' social contexts. To begin to fill in these knowledge gaps, in this study we sought to gain insight into how mentors working with children who experience high levels of environmental risk perceived environmental factors and negotiated their interactions with individuals beyond the dyad.

1.4 Variations in Mentoring Models and Implications for Mentor Roles

To understand the challenges and opportunities mentors may face in relation both to youth and their environments, we must consider the variety of possible role definitions subsumed under the umbrella of "youth mentor," as well. The majority of mentors in today's formal youth mentoring landscape are volunteers, but some programs have crafted alternative approaches that involve compensating mentors. Some of these programs provide small stipends to mentors whose roles otherwise resemble a volunteer. The program under study here, however, draws on a far more intensive model, in which mentors fulfill their roles as a full-time salaried job and are described within their agency as "professional mentors." The program model is described in detail in the "Setting" subsection of our Methods (2.1); here we examine the implications of a "professional mentoring" model for how mentors' roles are defined, especially with regards to their engagement with contextual factors.

In our previous study (Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014), we discussed mentors' claim that a crucial and unique feature of their role was their ability to cross over into multiple key settings. They emphasized that it was not only that they had sufficient time to engage in these settings because of the number of hours each week they devoted to their work, but that entering into these settings as "professionals" provided them with authority and credibility that enhanced access and cooperation. In this more expansive and intensive version of the mentoring role, then, mentors take on the role that Keller (2005) ascribes to caseworkers in his Systems Theory of Mentoring, interacting with families, teachers, and other service providers, and doing so from a quasi-professional, expert position. In our previous study, we also described mentors' reported propensity to expend considerable effort and perform difficult or unpleasant tasks to achieve desired outcomes because they felt a heightened sense of accountability and obligation due to the fulfillment of the mentoring role in a full-time salaried capacity. Whereas volunteer mentors who experience challenges or perceive threats related to mentee environmental factors might simply choose to limit their engagement with mentee environments, "professional" mentors may feel an imperative to engage in these environments regardless of their level of comfort. Examining how these mentors' perceptions of mentee environmental factors may inform their navigation of these environments might be uniquely illuminating because they must interact considerably with individuals aside from their mentees regardless of their perceptions or level of comfort.

2. Method

2.1 Setting

This study drew on interviews with mentors employed by the New York City “chapter” of Friends of the Children (FOTC), an international network of independent nonprofit organizations that share a common mission and programmatic approach to working with youth. The primary goal of the program is to engage youth in long-term mentoring relationships with full-time “professional” mentors in communities facing notable challenges, including poverty and violence. FOTC programs select the most highly at-risk children as indexed by the presence of a high number of evidence-based individual and environmental risk factors and a low number of protective factors (<http://www.friendsofthechildren.org>). In partnership with neighborhood-based public elementary schools, kindergarten and first grade aged children considered appropriate for the program are identified by FOTC staff through 6 weeks of direct observation in the classroom, cafeteria, and playground, as well as through consultation with teachers and other school personnel. With ongoing parental consent, FOTC pledges that as long as children live in the chapter service area they will have a FOTC mentor continuously involved in their lives for the next 12 years.

Mentors were employed full time and matched to children by gender. Those paired with elementary school aged children worked with eight children at a time and those paired with adolescents had twelve to fourteen mentees. Mentors were required to have bachelor's degrees and previous experience working with vulnerable youth. They were asked to make a 3-year commitment at hire and participated in a weeklong pre-service training and several “ride alongs” with experienced mentors prior to working alone with children. Mentors consisted of six male and seven female mentors serving 112 youth between five and seventeen years old.

Most families living in the neighborhood were low-income and either of African American, Hispanic/Latino, or West African immigrant background. Accordingly, over 66% of the youth served by the program lived below the poverty line, 99% qualified for free/reduced lunch, and the racial/ethnic makeup of program youth was 71% African American, 22% Hispanic/Latino, and 7% first generation or immigrant of West African descent. Because FOTC mentors were expected to interact with mentees' family members and teachers, and because youth were selected for program participation because they demonstrated high and multifaceted risk, focusing on the phenomenology of the mentoring role using FOTC mentors represents an “intensity sampling” strategy, defined as the use of “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28).

2.2 Participants

Mentors employed in the role of mentor for at least one year ($N = 9$) were recruited to participate. This cut-off was used in order to assess the perceptions of mentors who had a range of mentoring experiences and who had already spent months working to build relationships with youth and families, and therefore had developed some sense of what their

role comprised week-to-week and how it changed over time. All eligible mentors agreed to participate.

Mean length of employment for mentors was 3.8 years (Range = 1.7 to 7.7 years). Mean age for mentors was 33.1 (Range = 25 to 49 years). Six mentors were male and three were female. Three identified as Hispanic/Latino, five as African American, and one as Asian Indian-American. Two had additional supervisory roles within the chapter. Three mentors worked solely with adolescents, and had an average roster of thirteen youth each. Four mentors worked with children between the ages of 5 and 11 years; each had eight children on their rosters. Mentors reported between two and nine years of prior professional experience working with children: five in school settings, two in after-school programs, and two in community-based prevention service programs. Two mentors reported prior experience with a formal volunteer mentoring program.

2.3 Interview

A 14 question structured interview protocol was developed to explore multiple aspects of mentors' conceptualizations of their role (the complete interview guide is available from the first author). Many prompts lent themselves to discussions relevant to our research questions for this study. Examples of prompts that were particularly targeted to our inquiries here included, "What are the challenges the children you work with face?"; "What are the strengths of the children you work with?"; "Are you the only mentor in the lives of the children you work with?"; "Do you think you are an important person in the life of the child or children you are mentoring? If so, how?"; and "What are the most important qualities for a professional mentor to have?" All interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the first author.

2.4 Procedure

This study was conducted as part of an ongoing multisite randomized controlled trial (author remove for blind review). It was originally approved and overseen by the Institutional Review Board of the non-profit research center (blinded for review) conducting the larger study. Following an informed consent meeting, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private interview room. Interviews usually lasted one hour, but ranged from forty minutes to over two hours. Participants received \$75 to compensate them for their time. This secondary data analysis was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a university (blinded for review).

2.5 Coding and Analysis

The analytic approach to this phenomenological study drew on strategies based in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which guided the generation of a step-by-step inductive account of the properties and dimensions of the constructs identified in this dataset. This approach has been recommended to examine processes or relationships between phenomena that might help explain practice or provide a framework for future research (Creswell, 2004). As the empirical literature currently lacks adequate representation of the link between mentors' attitudes toward their mentees and mentees' environmental contexts, and mentors' fulfillment of their roles, grounded theory represents a fitting methodological approach.

Analysis was conducted with *Dedoose* web-based qualitative analysis software (Dedoose Version 3.3, 2012).

In the first step of the analytic process, two coders – the first author and a collaborator – conducted independent *open coding* of interview transcript excerpts, identifying important or interesting concepts and generating a number of initial categories (i.e. phenomena that seem conceptually similar or related in meaning). Guided by the research questions, categorical codes were generated inductively, deriving concepts, their properties (i.e. subcategories of the larger umbrella categories), and dimensions (i.e. the spectra of what falls within given categories) from reading and digesting interviews. The “constant comparative” method was employed, comparing excerpts against each other that seemed to represent thematic similarities and differences within emerging categories and properties in order to define their bounds. This helped in identifying complex and inclusive categories, ensuring their internal coherence and consistency, and detecting thematic similarities and differences in reported experiences across individuals and situations (Boeije, 2002; Latta & Goodman, 2011).

Following this phase, the two coders met to discuss, merge, and refine categories to create a codebook (available from the first author), which each then used to code each interview separately. Mapping out relations between categories and their properties and dimensions to contextualize phenomena, referred to as axial coding, followed codebook-guided coding. Interviews were re-examined to seek disconfirming evidence and counter-examples and verification that the proposed scheme represented the data. In the last stage of the grounded theory process, *selective coding*, categories were integrated and refined by going back through the interview data and memos (described below) to check for internal consistency as well as nonconforming data. When outliers or disconfirming evidence were found, intervening variables or conditions were sought to explain the variability and category definitions, properties, and dimensions were modified accordingly.

In addition to the constant comparative method described above, both coders used memo writing throughout the entirety of the analytic process, which involves documenting questions and thoughts that arise throughout the analysis process, and in this case sharing them with each other. The collaboration also involved extensive discussion and refinement of codes and categories at every stage.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

This study takes the form of a phenomenological exploration. We draw on interviews with several individuals who share the experience of serving as “professional” youth mentors in order to describe their lived experience and identify features that may be common across many or all of them, or unique to just one or two of them (Creswell, 2004). An ecological perspective (Kelly, 1966) undergirds this study by focusing on mentors’ relationships to their immediate environments, and on the relationships between mentors and other individuals contextualized by specific settings or circumstances. This perspective also emphasizes the adaptive function of mentors’ perceptions and approaches within the contexts in which they operate (the schools, communities and families they occupy via their

mentees) and the stressors and rewards they experience in relation to these perceptions of mentee context.

Given how little is known about the relationship between mentors' conceptualizations of their mentees and the environmental factors present in their mentees' lives, and of their own role as mentors, we did not have *a priori* hypotheses. Rather, consistent with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we planned for the data analytic process to generate hypotheses. Our specific research questions hinged on exploring how mentors defined:

1. The protective factors and risk factors (i.e., the conditions or attributes that mitigate risk, and increase risk, for negative life outcomes) present in the lives of mentees on both individual and environmental levels;
2. The nature of their mentoring role in light of their sense of protective and risk factors; and
3. Their involvement with and influence on their mentees and other key individuals in their mentees' lives.

4. Results

This section presents the properties and dimensions that emerged from our analysis of mentors' descriptions of individual and environment-level risks and strengths, and their role definition and negotiation. The frequencies of mentors' responses across emergent categories and properties are outlined in Table 1. These were further refined through the axial and selective coding stages to reflect the categories and properties described below. We organized our findings around three major categories: Risk and Protective Factors; Mentor Role: The Mentor-Mentee Relationship; and Mentor Role: Engagement with Others.

4.1 Risk and Protective Factors

Analyses of this category centered on the ecological levels on which mentors identified risks and protective factors. Risk factors were defined as elements present in mentees' lives that mentors perceive as problematic, negative, dangerous, or deficient. Protective factors were defined as elements that mentors perceive as positive, helpful, protective, or as strengths.

Mentors located youth risk factors predominantly on an environmental level, as well as attributed individual-level risk factors to environmental influences. They cited peer and community pressures to become involved in delinquent or risky activities, and schools that exacerbated rather than ameliorated both academic and social-emotional problems.

Describing a confluence of family- and community-level risk factors, one mentor explained:

The neighborhood – one of the kids' blocks, he walks through the entire block and there's all the males that are not ideal to be in his life, so they're rolling dice, or they're selling drugs, and they all know him, they've known him since they were little, and it's who he looks up to since that male figure was not in the house.

Describing youths' schools, one mentor said, "If the schools weren't as horrific as they are, things in our children's lives would go a lot better."

Mentors identified a number of risk factors related to characteristics of their mentees' home lives. They described challenges faced by youth because of unsupportive or negative parenting styles, as well as low parental support because of parents' work schedules or competing demands. Mentors also described home-level instability due to adults in and out of the home because of incarceration, shifting housing needs, and changing relationships; parents' unstable employment and shifting work schedules; and a lack of predictability due to poverty.

There was a range of responses around mentors' identification of environmental-level protective factors. One mentor broadly characterized families as sources of support and nurturance. By way of example, he described the family of one mentee: "It's just a very loving family... There's ups and there's downs, but their strength is their family." This mentor was the only one to specifically identify environmental-level supports in response to the prompt regarding mentee strengths. At various points in other interviews, however, several other mentors noted that some mentees' families were supportive to varying degrees, and identified other mentoring figures in some of their mentees' lives.

Mentors largely described their mentees' individual-level risks in relation to the difficulties youth faced in navigating challenges presented to them by their environments:

I think the main reason for a lot of their academic struggles is that a lot of them don't get any academic support at home. So when it falls on the eight-year-old to be doing all their academic work, a lot of times it doesn't get done.

Mentors cited a variety of individual-level protective factors that youth possessed (*e.g.*, charisma, humor, kindness, personality, and resilience): "Each and every one of the girls that I work with are extremely resilient. They're very adaptable." Some mentors described individual strengths as buffers against environmental-level factors or existing in spite of them: "Despite the circumstances that they're in, they really work hard." Others, as noted above, attributed individual-level strengths to family support.

4.2 Mentor Role: The Mentor-Mentee Relationship

Mentors defined the primary day-to-day focus of their role as fostering, nurturing, and maintaining close, positive one-on-one relationships with their mentees. Participating in a variety of activities, partnering with youth consistently week-to-week and over the long-term, and entering into settings such as home and school, were all conceptualized as critical because of the ways in which these actions nurtured relationships. Mentors described setting and working toward goals with their mentees, but described their close relationships as necessary foundations for providing instrumental support or working toward other goals. Mentors explained the value in joining with youth in multiple key contexts such as home, school, and in the community, in part because of the insight it afforded them into their mentees' lives, which allowed them to progressively build deeper, closer relationships as well as facilitated the identification of needs.

Mentors' descriptions of their roles also reflected their perceptions of their mentees' needs and environments. For example, mentors' often described serving as a counterbalance to parents' limited capacities, a lack of positive supports, and the instability present in mentees'

lives: “A lot of the girls that I have are from single parent homes, and really little structure or no structure... I think I’m a key person in setting down the structure and the love and the care for them.” They especially highlighted the importance of the consistency of their involvement week-to-week and over the long-term in light of home-level instability: “The kids need stability in their life; I think it’s what they lack. They don’t have consistency, and to have a mentor who’s there for at least three years of their life, that’s a long time.”

Some mentors described substituting for parents. One described how mentees’ parents relied on him to fill gaps in the adult support their children received:

In some cases they’ll ask their parents and their parents will say, “Oh, what about asking [Mentor 1]? Maybe he can go with you.” Because either they don’t want to, or they don’t have the time to do what their child wants them to.

A subset of mentors described filling a particularly critical void in the lives of youth. One mentor who described himself as the only positive male role model in the lives of his mentees said:

The ladies are less likely to discipline them [adolescent boys], or raise their voice the way that I think their father might. Two of the moms have already said “I don’t know what to do anymore, they’re out of control, I’m not going to be here fighting with him,” physically fighting. So the kids see that, saying okay, I’m in control now, and they’re going to start making bad decisions because they think they’re in control, and there’s only me to try to right their path.

Other mentors described their role as supplementary rather than corrective, complementing the work of parents, teachers, and the youth themselves:

The periods where we’re both together on that, and mom’s together on that, and the school’s together on that... that’s the best thing... because I feel like the machine is working. Not just me, it’s like, you did what you needed to do, and I gave you the support that you needed to get, and at school you got the support, or you rose above the lack of having support, and the whole thing is working fine.

4.3 Mentor Role: Engagement with Others

The second distinct category to emerge from the analysis of “Mentor Role” revolved around mentors’ descriptions of their engagement with other key individuals in their mentees’ lives. These descriptions related to their involvement in multiple contexts, but focused on relationships with parents, other family members, teachers, peers, and other service providers.

Mentors described serving as liaisons between home and school, and advocating for youth in school and other service settings. Mentors also described partnerships they maintained with other businesses and agencies, either established on their own or via FOTC, through which youth could receive services or participate in enrichment activities. They described their relationships with their mentees’ families as especially important, particularly close and connected, and an element of their role to which they devoted considerable time and energy. Multiple mentors described themselves as “members of the family:” “You’re so close,

because everything is centered, you know, me and the family, and me being a part of their lives.”

All mentors emphasized their extensive engagement with other key individuals across various settings, but described differing engagement approaches ranging from egalitarian to mentor-driven. A mentor who identified family-level strengths described collaborating with other key individuals in his mentees’ lives: “I learn how other either mentor-like people or teacher-like people affect them in their lives, and I can have a positive relationship with them there.” A mentor who described herself as a counterbalance to the lack of support and structure other individuals could offer her mentees described herself as the galvanizing force for a network of supports for youth:

I think it starts with yourself. If you come at it with a clear objective and keep that mission in mind, and have that support in FOTC, and in the community, with the parents, the school, [City Program 1], whatever other organizations your child is tapped into. I think that helps build and continue the web of connections and growth for that child.

Many mentors described feeling disappointed or frustrated by other decision-makers in youths’ lives. They felt that the lack of positive youth support attenuated their own effectiveness, both by impeding their efforts, and by dampening or counteracting the positive effects of their work with their mentees:

I think the families and the parents, and the schools [are the biggest challenges mentors face]. You just hit a brick wall with some of the people who are involved in their lives, and they don’t really want to go the direction that you want to go. So you know what will help the child, but other people kind of block that. And there’s only so much you can do at times. When you have uncooperative parents, uncooperative teachers, other people in the community, it’s tough to deal with them.

Mentors’ descriptions of the limits around their engagement with families varied, as did their rationale for setting particular limits. Some described the importance of setting boundaries and limiting their involvement with families for their own well-being. Others said extensive involvement with families had to be limited in order to preserve the amount and quality of time mentors focused on their mentees. One mentor described the importance of shaping his involvement to avoid undermining youth and families’ independence:

I think sometimes the parents and the children can overly rely on the program to help them. Sometimes you have to draw the line, but it’s being there to help them and support them as opposed to trying to do everything, and do everything for them.

One mentor emphasized the importance of remaining uninvolved, even in problematic family situations he might witness:

I call it the National Geographic Factor... you’ve just got to let it play out. You cannot get involved with whatever’s going on in the family. I have horrible situations right now with some of my kids and their family. I cannot get involved,

in terms of like, oh you shouldn't have hit him; oh you shouldn't have punished him. You should have light; it's three o'clock in the afternoon, and we're walking into a cave... You can't get involved.

In contrast, another mentor described his propensity to intervene:

If we see things going wrong in the household, you can kind of, once you get to know the family, kind of step in and say, hey, you know what? I think this should be happening. Or maybe I can help you out with doing something with this child. Or maybe I can help you with parenting classes.

Mentors all described the challenge of identifying and maintaining appropriate boundaries and role definition given the flexible, individualized nature of mentoring. Mentors also linked the challenges of negotiating boundaries to their long-term, multifaceted, multi-context involvement with youth and others, and to a sense that so many responsibilities fell within the bounds of their role: "Being a Friend (i.e., a FOTC mentor) it's kind of hard to set that boundary, especially when you have that long-term relationship. And even though it's very good to be seen as a part of the family, at times." Mentors' sense of their roles as multifaceted and ambiguously bound, in combination with their perception of the high needs of mentees and families, contributed to concerns that they were unable to fulfill what they saw as their fundamental professional obligation: to positively alter the life-course of the children and youth on their roster.

5. Discussion

This qualitative inquiry into the phenomenology of youth mentoring explored the dynamic processes by which mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentees' environments informed their interpretation and navigation of their role. Prior literature has examined mentors' perceptions of mentees and mentee environments, and of mentor role fulfillment (Herrera et al., 2013; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Spencer, 2007), but has not traced the processes by which one may inform the other.

A heuristic that emphasized the prevalence and salience of environmental-level risk pervaded these interviews, with youth challenges attributed to environmental inputs such as poor schools, negative neighborhood and peer influences, and especially home-level factors such as poverty, instability, and low support and nurturance. This notion of family-level deficits appears in other fields and roles, as well. For example, Abdul-Adil & Farmer (2006) describe an "urban legend" of parental apathy regarding children's education that researchers and educators have applied to parents from urban minority communities, reinforcing perceptions of the difficulty of boosting parent involvement.

In contrast, individual-level protective factors were commonly seen as existing "in spite of" environment, although mentors did identify supports for youth on home, school, and community levels. Given that FOTC selects children for program participation because they demonstrate high, multifaceted risk status on both environmental and individual levels, attributing youths' problems to environmental risks may be adaptive. It indicates, perhaps, one means available to mentors to resolve the dissonance between the deficits-based eligibility criteria for children to enter the program and the strengths-based approach

encouraged once mentors and youth are matched, and could protect mentors' positive feelings for their mentees, and thus the relationship.

Mentors defined their own roles as primarily youth-focused. Importantly, however, their understanding of and engagement with mentees' environments fundamentally shaped their sense even of the youth-focused elements of their work. They described engaging with their mentees across multiple contexts as a critical mechanism for creating deep, authentic bonds and for serving mentees effectively, both because of the insight they gained and because of the experiences within these settings they shared with mentees. Additionally, mentors couched their role descriptions within the larger web of environmental factors in mentees' lives. Some mentors contrasted their provision of support, structure, positivity and nurturance with mentees' other more negative and problematic relationships, depicting their role as a counterbalance, while others described roles that complemented other existing environmental supports.

Mentors also ascribed importance to their involvement with other individuals in their mentees' lives, and described expending considerable effort working with others, especially families. Mentors' descriptions of their partnerships with parents, teachers, and others highlighted their sense of the network of interactions and supports needed to bolster the creation and maintenance of deep, durable mentor-mentee relationships, as well as to realize more distal positive outcomes for youth. The opaque boundaries of the mentor role were highlighted by some mentors' sense that their role sometimes could and should encompass intervention with families, and others' sense that their role was limited to bearing witness rather than intervening.

In addition, mentors located most challenges in the components of their roles extending beyond the dyad. The competing demands of the prioritization of one-on-one relationships with youth, and of mentors' extensive involvement across domains – which some saw as necessary because of environmental-level problems, and all saw as necessary in order to maximize their effectiveness – contributed to their reports of role overload and limited self efficacy. Some also described frustration or disappointment regarding their perceptions of families' limited capacities to contribute positively to their mentees' development. Many mentors' focus on environmental-level deficits seemed to obstruct their ability to see parents as potential co-interventionists, and to lead for some to the adoption of a less collaborative approach, frustration that others did not support their work, and a sense of overwhelming responsibility placed on their shoulders. As one said, "there's only me to right their path" – a burdensome perception.

Importantly, all mentors described the necessity of working closely with other individuals toward the goals of best serving their mentees, even those who perceived that other individuals in mentees' lives were unable to support them well, exerted a negative influence, or undermined efforts mentors put forth. Equally importantly, the more family-positive, collaborative, and egalitarian mentors who described negotiating their role within their mentees' networks to be maximally effective without overstepping *also* endorsed a sense of relative unpreparedness for navigating their roles beyond their dyadic interactions. Though FOTC expectations for mentors included interaction with families and teachers, *how* to do

so, and how to balance these interactions with the one-on-one facets of their role, seemed not to be well operationalized or supported organizationally. Across all combinations of mentors' perceptions of youth and their conceptualizations of mentor role, this study substantiates the concerns raised by Spencer, Collins, Ward, and Smashnaya (2010) regarding the importance and challenge of attending to the many complicated relationships that occur *around* the mentor-mentee relationship, and for which mentors in this program seemed less prepared and supported.

Long-term, intensive involvement with a young person may render an arrangement of limited involvement with parents and other environmental elements unrealistic, but also suboptimal. Close relationships with families and with other key individuals may boost the impact of mentoring by enhancing the depth and authenticity of the relationship between mentor and mentee, activating and coordinating extant supports for youth, and strengthening family systems (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Spencer et al., 2011; Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). Mentoring may also represent a unique opportunity to engage with families unlikely to seek services, and who can benefit greatly from the supportive relationship offered via a child's mentor. Given the inevitability of engaging with families, the potential transformative value in working closely with them, and the significant and unique challenges that accompany this more expansive approach, this study highlights the need for explicit support for mentors in enhancing the facets of their role that extend beyond their dyadic relationships, as well as for holistic conceptualizations of the many different roles focusing on both mentees and on other individuals that mentors assume in the course of their service.

5.1 Strengths and Limitations

As a mentor employed at this chapter of FOTC at the time of the interviews, the first author had pre-existing and ongoing collegial relationships with the mentors interviewed. She did not offer personal opinions and strived to maintain an air of openness and neutrality during interviews. Nonetheless, because she served in the same role as those interviewed and had personally informed viewpoints that they may have known or guessed, it is possible that demand characteristics influenced mentor responses, or that some responses reflected close colleagues "blowing off steam" rather than their fully considered views.

The process of analysis is also shaped by researcher values and biases. Just as an epistemology of social constructivism influences our understanding of mentors' perceptions and performance, we also recognize the active role we took in making meaning out of the data, informed by our personal experiences, values, and views. The collaborators and authors discussed biases with each other throughout this project, but acknowledge rather than deny the possible influence of our own perceptions on the results and implications discussed here.

Because this study drew on preexisting data, we were not in a position to conduct an analysis using the full range of methods associated with grounded theory. Specifically, we were not able to pose questions to the mentors that could have further illuminated the phenomena in question. We were also not able to use an initial snowball sampling strategy, nor sample for negative cases, both because this was a secondary data analysis and because

we were limited to interviewing experienced mentors at one agency chapter. The findings presented are also limited to a particular form of youth mentoring as practiced and experienced by professional mentors firmly committed to their roles at one particular agency site.

The possibility exists, too, that the framing or phrasing of questions pulled for certain responses, which could have led to an inaccurate characterization of these mentors' perceptions and experiences. For example, we asked mentors to describe mentees' strengths, which may pull for consideration of individual-level as opposed to environmental-level protective factors. Similarly, we asked if they believed they were the only mentors present in their mentees' lives, but may have pulled for different answers if we had phrased the question differently, e.g., "Are there other supportive adults present in your mentees' lives?" It should be noted, however, that in spite of the prompt's phrasing many mentors did identify other mentor-like figures in youths' lives.

As Miles and Huberman (1994) remind us, however, "the most useful generalizations from qualitative studies are *analytic*, not 'sample to population' " (p. 28). This study demonstrated the importance of accounting for mentor perceptions, and considering how they may inform and interact with role fulfillment. We do not suggest that these perceptions or processes look exactly the same across mentors and agencies. Limiting our sample to one agency, in fact, allowed us to see the considerable heterogeneity and complexity of mentors' perceptions regarding youth, context, and mentor role within one organizational setting.

Our investigation was also well served by the fact that these mentors experienced an especially intensive version of the situation we sought to understand. The mentors interviewed shared role characteristics with other community-based youth mentors, but their fulfillment of the mentoring role for several years, the amplified nature of their involvement in other settings, and the high-risk profiles of program youth, meant that their views on these topics were especially rich, and represented significant experience with the themes in question.

5.2 Future Directions

This analysis highlights the need for a fuller and more nuanced understanding of mentors' relationships with other individuals involved in the lives of participating youth, as well as research linking the quality of these extra-dyadic relationships to mentor-mentee relationships and youth outcomes. It will be important to trace variability in these processes across youth, mentor, and program characteristics.

FOTC is atypical of youth mentoring programs because program youth are especially high risk, and because of the professionalization and long-term commitment of the mentoring role. Within this more intensive model lies an opportunity for more training and continued support than many agencies could offer their mentors. This study, then, specifically highlights a need and an opportunity to pivot the FOTC program toward a more inclusive agenda – a reimagining of FOTC mentors' as well as the program's roles that explicitly facilitates rather parent involvement in the mentoring process as well as the development and support of program youth more broadly.

The implications of this work do extend to organizations with more limited resources and/or less intensive mentoring models, as they may also be well-served by explicitly acknowledging, structuring and supporting the relationships mentors form with individuals besides mentees. Agencies can provide training and ongoing support aimed at fostering an understanding of youth and their environments that may be more conducive to partnering effectively with all individuals involved in a child's development. Absent agency-level strategies that promote these dialogues and understandings, some mentors may maintain or develop perceptions of youth and/or their environments that create barriers to effective collaboration and the ultimate achievement of positive youth outcomes. Agencies may also benefit from embedding mentoring within a broader range of intervention strategies in keeping with the practice of environmental involvement and activation that characterizes relatively effective intervention and prevention efforts for youth (Spencer et al., 2010; Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014).

Implications also extend beyond the realm of mentoring programs, suggesting important foci for training and support, as well as research, for other providers, settings, and service models. We have not encountered theories or research from other fields that parallel our hypothesis that identifying family-level challenges may serve to preserve positive feelings towards children and youth who display clear problems. Discussions of strengths-based approaches, however, have noted the gap between rhetoric and operationalization (Marty, Rapp, & Carlson, 2001; Oliver, 2014); in other words, it is far easier to say a program model is strengths-based than to construct a program with the tools necessary to implement a sound strengths-based practice. Across service modalities, then, programs and providers may benefit from the recommendations listed above for mentoring agencies.

5.3 Conclusions

Community-based youth mentoring can be cast as an individual-level intervention, but the role comprises significant environmental involvement. Conceptualizing other individuals and settings as deficient may protect mentor-mentee relationships, but may impede work that mentors do with other individuals in their mentees' lives; the cost of perceiving key settings and individuals as deficient or dangerous may be considerable on the individual mentor and program level. The significant environmental component of community-based mentoring, especially for mentors who enter regularly into homes, schools, and other community settings, can, instead, be capitalized on as a unique strength of the intervention. Mentors' environmental involvement can complement or activate settings' protective properties as well as enrich mentor-mentee relationships. To optimize these connections, however, agencies must train and support mentors around their perceptions of and engagement with individuals besides their mentees, or reconsider program models to encompass a broader range of supports that extend beyond program youth.

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Highlights

- Mentors were interviewed about role facets involving mentees and other individuals.
- Youth problems, more than strengths, were described as environmental byproducts.
- Mentors related perceptions of their roles to perceptions of mentees' environments.
- Mentors work with families was less structured than dyadic role.
- Challenges related to role overload, opaque boundaries, low support and high risk.

Table 1

Emergent Categories and Properties of Mentor Conceptualizations of Youth, Environment, and Role

Category	Property	Frequency
Risk Factors	Community	14
	School	5
	Home	26
	Individual	14
	Interactive (individual by home, school, or community)	10
Protective Factors	Community	1
	School	2
	Home	3
	Individual	23
Mentor Role: The Mentor-Mentee Relationship	Primacy of relationship	23
	Consistency	7
	Multifaceted role	8
	Multiple settings	9
	<i>Mentor as counterbalance</i>	14
	<i>Mentor as supplement</i>	2
Mentor Role: Engagement with Others	Involvement with family members	13
	Involvement with school personnel	6
	Involvement with others	4
	<i>Intervention recipients: Youth</i>	10
	<i>Intervention recipients: Family</i>	5
Influence	Influence on mentee	54
	Influence on family	7
	Influence on schools/institutions	1
	Influence on community	3
Mentor Challenges	Negotiation of boundaries/Role overload	17
	<i>Burdensome workload</i>	15
	Challenges: families	7
	Challenges: schools	2