



The Study of Mentoring in the Learning Environment (SMILE): The role of mentor-mentee ethnic similarity in changes in youths' connectedness to other cultures



Michael Karcher, Laura Roy-Carlson & Kristine Benne
University of Texas at San Antonio www.utsasmile.org
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Abstract

To better understand the influence of cultural similarity on helping relationships we examined its role in non-professional youth mentoring relationships. 430 Latino youth were randomly assigned to weekly mentoring or a comparison intervention. Results revealed that Latino youth with Latino mentors demonstrated greater gains in their connectedness to culturally different peers, but same-ethnicity matches did not differ from mixed-ethnicity matches on any other outcome variables.

Purpose

Our understanding of the effects of ethnic similarity between youth and those who provide them prevention services may benefit from the study of increasingly common program-based mentoring relationships. The purpose of this study was to assess whether ethnically similar providers of mentoring were more effective?

Introduction

In the field of youth mentoring, the debate about the effects of same versus different-race matches remains unsettled. Although Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, and Lee (2002) reported that the racial background of the mentor had an effect on outcomes, these effects are hard to interpret and were not consistent across multiple measures, nor were these effects revealed in a recent meta-analysis of moderators of youth mentoring program effectiveness (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine & Cooper, 2002).

In the larger field of prevention, increasingly attention has been paid to culture as a moderator of program impact, specifically for programs serving Latino youth and for youth mentoring in particular (Sanchez & Colon, 2005). Of course, the effects of cultural similarity may be outcome specific. It seems logical to expect, for example, that same versus cross-ethnicity matches would differently affect youths' attitudes, such as towards other cultural groups.

The question, however, of whether culturally similar matches or different ethnicity matches will best achieve the outcome of increased connectedness to peers from different cultural groups remains unanswered. On the one hand, Coleman, Wampold, and Casali (1995) have suggested that a youths' openness to spending time with and getting to know youth from other cultural groups is a main determinant of the development of a bicultural identity, and biculturalism has been identified as a strong predictor of mental health and academic success among Latinos (Ramirez, 1999). On the other hand, Ogbu (1990) has argued that for minority youth a positive orientation towards the majority culture is more likely and effectively cultivated within same-race or culturally similar matches.

We tested the hypothesis that same-ethnicity mentors would have greater impact on their mentees, not so much because one side of the debate seems necessarily stronger, but because this is a commonly held belief among many who coordinate youth mentoring programs (Sanchez & Colon, 2005).

Methods

Sample

Mentors (n = 292) were enrolled in the Communities in Schools (CIS) program as volunteer mentors assigned to mentor in one of 18 elementary, middle, and high schools in San Antonio, Texas. The mentors met individually with a student (92% Latino) for one hour a week for three to six months on average. Agency staff recruited mentors at military bases, local businesses, colleges and within local organizations (e.g., Chamber of Commerce). 70% were college students, 13% were military personnel, 15% full-time employed adults, and 2% "Other." There were equal numbers of Anglo and Latino mentors, although there were more female than male mentors.

Mentees (n = 430). Pre data were collected from 525 youth between the ages of 10 and 18 across the 18 public schools in the same metropolitan area. Seven were elementary schools, five were middle schools, and six were high schools. The majority of the students were from families earning less than \$20,000 a year. At post-test there were 468 youth, 313 girls and 155 boys (more girls demonstrated interest in participating in the agency programs). The analyses in this study looked only at the 430 Latino youth in the study.

Measures

Hemingway; Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (5.5 version; Karcher, 2003). The Hemingway instrument consists of nine scales that assess adolescents' caring for and involvement in specific relationships and activities. *Connectedness to Culturally Different Peers* asks about youths' desire to interact with and get to know peers from other cultural groups. The scales have demonstrated good three-month test-retest reliability, a distinct factor structure, and evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Karcher, 2003). Scale pre and post estimates of internal consistency were satisfactory for the *Connectedness to Culturally Different Peers* scale. .80 and .84.

Perceived Mattering Survey (Marshall, 2001). Mattering is the psychological tendency to view the self as significant to others. The survey was developed to assess how much youth feel they matter to their mentors. It consists of eight items, including "My mentor notices when I need help." The survey demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .75/.81$).

Missing data procedures. We used all of the demographic variables and the scale pre-test variables to impute values using the EM (Expectation Maximization) method procedure in the SPSS Missing Values module.

Results

Extending prior analyses (Karcher et al., 2006), a three-way factorial design was used to test the interaction of age, sex and mentoring effects on connectedness to culturally different peers. These analyses used the whole sample of Latino youth (n = 430). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and illustrates that significant greater connectedness to culturally different peers were reported by younger male and older female mentees after mentoring.

Then to examine the effects of same versus different ethnicity mentors, we used linear regression to explain variation in connectedness to regress post-culturally different peers on pre-test connectedness, mentees' age, a covariate on which those with and without ethnically similar mentors differed (change in social support a mid year), perceived mattering, and mentors' ethnicity. This model revealed that, beyond the effects of age, relationship closeness (mattering), and the two pre-variables, there was a significant contribution of mentor's ethnicity, with having a same-ethnicity mentor being associated with increased connectedness to culturally different peers at the end of the school year.

Results - continued

Intervention Group	Sex	Grade Level	Mean	Standard Error	95% CI Lower Bound	95% CI Upper Bound
Non-Mentee	Female	5th through 8th grade	4.41	.07	4.27	4.557
	Female	High School	4.18	.08	4.02	4.34
	Male	5th through 8th grade	4.13	.09	3.95	4.31
Mentee	Male	High School	4.38	.14	4.11	4.65
	Female	5th through 8th grade	4.30	.10	4.11	4.49
	Female	High School	4.42*	.09	4.25	4.59
	Male	5th through 8th grade	4.43*	.10	4.24	4.62
	Male	High School	4.33	.14	4.06	4.60

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for three-way interaction of sex, with grade level, with mentoring, $F(1, 420) = 5.08, p < .05$. (Simple effect comparisons between treatment and control participants of the same sex and grade level, with asterisk denoting group with higher mean. * $p < .05$)

Subsequent analyses were conducted to examine whether the effect of having an ethnically similar mentor varied as a function of age, and none of these tests were significant.

Similarly, there were no other main effects of mentors' ethnic similarity on the other study outcomes, such as on social skills, self-esteem, or other forms of connectedness (see Karcher et al., 2006). For example, the MANCOVA testing for an effect of mentor's ethnicity on connectedness to school, teachers, and peers was non-significant, $F = 1.21(3, 177)$, although the simple effect on connectedness to peers (in general) approached significance, $F = 287(1, 179), p < .10$.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	23.888(a)	5	4.778	14.228	.000
Intercept	3.799	1	3.799	11.314	.001
Connectedness to Culturally Different Peers (Pre-test; September)	12.560	1	12.560	37.405	.000
Change in perceived "Social support from adults at school" (residual, at mid-year, January)	2.076	1	2.076	6.182	.014
Mentees' age	1.992	1	1.992	5.932	.016
How much mentees felt they "mattered" to their mentors	2.710	1	2.710	8.070	.005
Mentor-Mentee ethnic similarity (0 = different, 1 = same/Latino)	1.526	1	1.526	4.544	.035
Error	53.054	158	.336		
Total	3162.278	164			
Corrected Total	76.942	163			

Table 2. Least squares regression predicting end-of-year connectedness to culturally different peers

Conclusions

There was a main effect of mentoring on changes in youths' self-reported connectedness to their culturally different peers, and this effect varied as a function of gender and age—namely, between-group (treatment vs. control) mentoring effects were found favoring younger male and older female mentees. Subsequent within-mentee group analyses revealed that same-ethnicity matches were associated with significantly greater increases in connectedness to peers from other cultural groups. That is, Latinos with Latino mentors demonstrated higher levels of connectedness to peers from other cultural groups at post-test. These effects did not appear to vary as a function of the mentee's age and sex. However, no effects of ethnic similarity were found on other outcomes in the study. A considerable limitation of the study is that mentors were not randomly assigned by ethnicity, which renders these analyses quasi-experimental at best. However, there appears to be some evidence supporting Ogbu's hypothesis that a positive other-group orientation may be better nurtured within ethnically similar helping relationships.

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