

“I Just Feel Safe With Him”: Emotional Closeness in Male Youth Mentoring Relationships

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This study provides an in-depth examination of close and enduring formal mentoring relationships between adolescent boys and adult men. Qualitative interviews conducted with 12 adolescent and adult pairs of participants ($n = 24$) in a one-to-one community-based youth mentoring program were analyzed thematically using a holistic-content approach. This yielded six major themes: (a) the importance of relationships with adult men in adolescence, (b) mentors' desires to be involved and emotionally connected male role models, (c) the close and enduring nature of the emotional connections forged, (d) the ways these relationships provided safe places for emotional vulnerability and support, (e) how these relationships helped some boys manage feelings of anger more effectively, and (f) vacillations on the part of the mentors between more and less conventional forms of masculinity in relation to the emotional nature of these relationships. The findings of this study suggest that close and enduring male mentoring relationships have the potential to provide adolescent boys with models for less constricting and conventional forms of masculinity, particularly with regard to emotional disclosures and expressivity.

Keywords: mentor relationships, adolescent boys, masculinity, qualitative research

Strong relationships with adults have been identified as a key ingredient for healthy psychological development in adolescence (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Community-based mentoring programs attempt to create such connections by matching youth living in single-parent homes or from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., low-income) with an unrelated adult in the hope that a caring and supportive relationship will develop. Although most programs match youth with same-sex mentors (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000), surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of gender in youth mentoring relationships in the empirical literature.

Mentoring researchers have pointed to gender differences in interpersonal relationships observed in the adolescent development literature to argue that such differences may affect the mentoring process (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy, & Sanchez, 2006). One common assertion is that boys are more likely to benefit from engagement in shared activities with adult men whereas girls may benefit more from relationships with women characterized by emotional closeness and self-disclosure (Belle, 1987; Bogat & Liang, 2005; Darling et al., 2006; Sullivan, 1996). Studies documenting boys' tendency to place greater emphasis on sharing activities and interests in their friendships (Frey & Rothlisberger, 1996; McNelles & Connolly, 1999) and girls' tendency toward greater levels of intimacy and emotional closeness in relationships (e.g., Kuttler, La Greca, & Prinstein, 1999) are cited to support such contentions. Thus, it has been suggested that boys may benefit more from a mentoring relationship that is less centered on expressions of personal closeness and more instrumental than psychosocial in focus (Darling et al., 2006).

However, research focused on explicating the experiences of adolescent boys and contextual-

This research was supported in part by funds given by the Adolescent & Youth Dissertation Award Program for research at the Henry A. Murray Research Center of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. The author would like to thank the participating agency for making this study possible, Stacey Schamber for her assistance carrying out the research and Adrian Verhulst for her editorial assistance with the manuscript.

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izing these within an understanding of the ways that culture and gender role norms shape boys' relational experiences and psychological development (e.g., Way & Chu, 2004) offers a different view. In particular, the characterization of males' relationships as being more activity-focused and less emotion-focused than females' has been challenged. In a longitudinal qualitative study on urban adolescent boys' friendships, Way (2004) describes deep, multifaceted, and emotionally connected relationships between adolescent boys and a yearning for such connections among boys who did not have close male friendships. However, she also observed that experiences of betrayal contributed to growing feelings of distrust in later adolescence and a sense among these boys that it had been easier to have close male friendships in early adolescence. Chu (2004), in her study of adolescent boys' identity development, noted that boys were not surprised that others might assume that they are disinterested in or oblivious to interpersonal cues. In fact, they were acutely aware of the expectations others held for them based on cultural conventions of masculinity.

Such cultural conventions have been outlined in the literature on masculinity ideologies or "beliefs about the importance of men adhering to culturally defined standards for male behavior" (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993, p. 85). These ideologies are thought to be one means by which boys and men internalize societal norms about appropriate or acceptable male attitudes and behaviors within specific cultural contexts. Although there is certainly significant diversity with regard to masculinity ideologies (Hearn & Collinson, 1994), Pleck (1995) has argued "there is a particular constellation of standards and expectations" (p. 20) that comprise traditional, conventional, or what Connell (1995) has called hegemonic masculinity. These include the restriction of emotional expressiveness, the denial of vulnerability, an emphasis on self-reliance and achievement, homophobia, and the avoidance of anything associated with femininity (Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1995).

It has been argued that men's fear of appearing feminine contributes to a reticence to express emotions (e.g., O'Neil, 1981), and it is widely held that boys' and men's friendships are less intimate than girls' and women's (Fehr, 2004; McNelles & Connolly, 1999). This difference has been attributed to lower levels of

self-disclosure on the part of males (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Dindia & Allen, 1992), a behavior considered to be critical to the development of intimacy (Fehr, 2004), but one that is in conflict with conventional gender role norms for men (O'Neil, Good, & Holmes, 1995). In adulthood, men have been found to be less emotionally expressive than women, with the exception of the expression of anger (Larson & Pleck, 1999), and have even been described as being "alexithymic," or distanced from their own emotional lives (Levant, 1996). The tendency toward restriction of emotional expressiveness on the part of men, once taken to be an inherent difference between adult men and women, is increasingly thought to be, in part, the result of adherence to conventional beliefs about masculinity over time (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005; Fischer & Good, 1997; Levant, 1996; Way, 1998). Unfortunately, this restricted emotionality has been associated with poorer psychological functioning in men (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995; Good et al., 1995).

Given the close personal nature of many mentoring relationships, such connections between boys and men may hold the potential to mitigate some of the negative effects of socialization toward conventional masculine gender role norms. For example, they may ease prohibitions on emotional expressiveness and emotional intimacy, thereby supporting socialization toward more positive forms of masculinity. Yet, scant attention has been devoted to understanding the role of gender in the mentoring process in any way. A small number of studies have examined whether mentoring is relatively more effective for boys or girls, yielding mixed results (e.g., DuBois, Holloway et al., 2002; Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Only a handful of studies look specifically at either male or female youth mentoring relationships. One study has examined gender-related processes in natural mentoring relationships between girls and women and concluded that these relationships can provide girls with sources of positive resistance to cultural forces and pressures associated with sexism and stereotypical beliefs about femininity (Sullivan, 1996).

A few mentoring programs do focus specifically on males and strive to foster connections that promote positive forms of masculinity. The importance of mentoring relationships between African American boys and men for instilling

cultural pride and providing support and guidance has been argued for in articles detailing such programs and their outcomes (Holland, 1996; Payne et al., 1995; Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003). Another program, Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP), brings male trainers to high school and college athletic teams (Katz, 1995). These programs argue that mentoring relationships with men can provide adolescent boys with role modeling that is qualitatively different from that which can be provided by adult women and that such modeling is vital for boys' healthy psychosocial development. Through positive role modeling, these programs view male mentoring relationships as working against negative and constraining societal notions of manhood in order to help boys develop into competent, confident, and well-rounded adults.

Indeed role modeling is one of the primary mechanisms through which youth mentoring is believed to yield positive benefits for youth more generally (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). The two other major mechanisms proposed are (a) enhancing the youths' social relationships and emotional well-being through corrective emotional experiences, opportunities for fun and escape from daily stresses, and assistance with emotional regulation, and (b) improving their cognitive skills through instruction and conversation (Rhodes et al., 2006). For these benefits to be realized, Rhodes (2002) asserts that a close emotional bond must be established between mentor and protégé. This contention is supported by recent research indicating that feelings of closeness and emotional support are key ingredients of mentoring relationships that are associated with improvements in youth functioning for both boys and girls (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Herrera et al., 2000). Such emotionally connected relationships between adult men and boys may provide opportunities for modeling of positive forms of masculinity by creating safe spaces for emotional vulnerability, thereby promoting the boys' psychosocial development in ways that transcend conventional or stereotypical notions of masculinity.

The purposes of the present study were as follows: (a) to examine how boys and men in successful and enduring formal mentoring relationships describe and experience these relationships, (b) identify which aspects of the relationship are considered to be important in

their views, and (c) examine whether and how these relationships are experienced as supporting the positive psychosocial development of the youth. To achieve these purposes, an analysis of in-depth interviews with adolescent boys and adult men collected for a larger study of relational processes in successful and enduring male and female youth mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2006) was conducted. The emphasis here was on exploring these males' understandings of and experiences in close and enduring mentoring relationships.

Method

Participants

Interviews with 12 pairs of male adolescents and adults ($n = 24$) who participated in a larger project examining the relational processes in male and female youth mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2006) were analyzed for the purposes of this study. The youth-adult pairs had been in a formal community-based mentoring relationship for a minimum of 1 year and were in relationships deemed to be strong and successful by agency staff members. These relationships ranged from 1 to 6 years in length ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.59$). The background characteristics of these pairs were typical of participants in this type of mentoring program (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; see Table 1 for details on each pair). The adult mentors, 11 White and 1 African American, were 25–48 years of age ($M = 35.58$, $SD = 5.92$) and middle class, based on references to occupations and education levels made in the interviews. The adolescents ranged in age from 12 to 16 years ($M = 13.83$, $SD = 1.64$) and were a racially and ethnically diverse group of 3 White, 5 African American, 1 Latino, and 3 bi or multiracial boys. A requirement for participation in this program was the absence of a father-figure in the home at the time of the match, so all of the boys had been residing in single-parent households headed by a female. Information on the socioeconomic status of the youths' families was not gathered for the purposes of this study. However, gross estimates on the part of the agency are that approximately 30% of the families served by this agency during the time of the study received some form of assistance, such as food, income, and housing subsidies.

Table 1
Age and Racial or Ethnic Background^a of the Big and Little Brothers (BB and LB respectively) and the Length of Time Each Pair Had Been Matched

Names ^b (age in years)	Race/ethnicity mentor	Race/ethnicity protégé	Match length (years)
BB Al (33)	White	White	1.5
LB Prince (14)			
BB Cape (48)	White	African American	1
LB U.T.K. (13)			
BB Cougar (34)	White	Hispanic	2
LB Pedro (15)			
BB Frank (40)	White	African American	1.5
LB T.K. Williams (12)			
BB Gig (38)	White	White	6
LB Shaggy (16)			
BB Jarred (36)	White	Spanish, Black, Italian	4.5
LB Cool Dude (12)			
BB John (30)	White	White	3
LB Pat (14)			
BB Rutledge (37)	White	African American, White	4
LB Raymond (16)			
BB Sherman (25)	African American	African American	2.5
LB Demetrious (16)			
BB Stewart (36)	White	African American	1
LB Bubblehead (12)			
BB Wolfgang (40)	White	Brazilian/ Polish/Italian/others	3.5
LB Maurice (14)			
BB Zeke (30)	White	Black	4
LB JaShawn (12)			

^a Identification provided by the participants. ^b Names selected by the participants.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a Big Brothers Association (BBA) volunteer, community-based, one-to-one mentoring program in an urban community in the northeast. The stated goal of BBA is to facilitate relationships that fit the following definition of mentoring: a relationship between an adult and a youth "in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé" (Rhodes, 2002, pp. 3). Further, this program adhered to the major practices and procedures that have been found to be associated with more enduring and effective relationships (DuBois, Holloway et al., 2002; MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2003), such as asking pairs to make an initial 1-year commitment to the relationship and to meet in person on a regular (weekly or biweekly) basis.

Agency staff members were asked to select pairs that had been matched for a minimum of 1

year and were believed to have become significant relationships in the youths' lives. The agency made the initial contact with the adult mentors who, if interested in participating, in turn contacted their protégés. Parental consent was obtained prior to the interview and participant assent at the time of interview. Each adult participant was given movie passes and each adolescent a gift certificate to a local music store upon completion of the interview. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviewees chose their own pseudonyms by which they are referred in this article and all other identifying information has been changed.

Interview Process

Each of the 12 adult-youth pairs participated in three-part in-depth (Johnson, 2002), semi-structured (Seidman, 1991) interviews conducted by the author, a European American woman. The interviews were 1.5 to 2 hours in

length and took place in a university office or the home of the adult or the adolescent, depending on the preference of the participants. The pairs came to the interview together, often making the interview a part of their planned activity for that day. The purpose of the study and the interview procedures were explained to each adult-youth pair. One participant was then interviewed individually, followed by the other, and finally the two were interviewed together as a pair.

In keeping with a semistructured approach to interviewing (Seidman, 1991), interview protocols were developed but were used primarily as a guide, allowing the interviewer to follow the narratives of each participant.¹ In order to garner both the adults' and adolescents' understandings of, and experiences in, these relationships, the questions covered such topics as their expectations going into the relationships, memories of their first meetings, typical activities, special/memorable moments or times of conflict/stress, and what kinds of support, if any, the relationships provided to the adolescents. These open-ended questions were followed by questions intended to facilitate further exploration of the specific experiences identified by the interviewee. For example, when an adolescent stated that he felt supported by his mentor, this response was followed by a request that the adolescent tell a story about a specific time when the mentor provided support, what happened, and how he experienced this support. When interviewed together, the pairs were asked to describe memorable moments in their relationship and any turning points they could identify.

Analysis

Analysis began after all of the interviews had been conducted. The transcripts of the audiotaped interviews were verified by listening to each tape in full and making any necessary corrections to the transcripts. Employing a holistic-content approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), thematic analyses were conducted with the entire interview transcript for each pair. In this approach, themes are identified by examining one interview at a time, often through multiple readings, and looking for emerging patterns. It was assumed that constructing an understanding of these males' ex-

periences would likely require following themes that may weave in and out of various narratives throughout the individual transcripts. In a holistic-content approach, initial themes are identified based on global impressions of the narratives and are then tracked throughout the interview transcript. The themes identified within each individual interview can then be examined across multiple transcripts for patterns and commonalities. In this study, a set of initial themes was identified by the author through an iterative process of reviewing each individual transcript, considering concepts from the literatures on mentoring and on male development, and returning to the full text of the individual interview transcripts to examine the larger context within which statements had been made. These major themes were grouped into three larger categories: relationship closeness, adolescent development, and relational processes. Once these categories and themes had been identified, a second analyst (a European American woman), coded the interviews for these themes and also identified new themes, which were then discussed with the author until agreement could be reached on the definition, presence, and salience of each theme. Conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were then constructed with the coded interview text to examine patterns in the themes across all 12 pairs.

Results

Examining these interviews with an eye toward gender-specific processes in male mentoring relationships yielded six major findings: (a) the importance of relationships with adult men in adolescence, (b) mentors' desires to be involved and emotionally connected male role models, (c) the close and enduring nature of the emotional connections forged, (d) the ways these relationships provided safe places for emotional vulnerability and support, (e) how these relationships helped some boys manage feelings of anger more effectively, and (f) vacillations on the part of the mentors between more and less conventional forms of masculinity in relation to the emotional nature of these

¹ Copies of the interview protocols are available from the author upon request.

relationships. These major findings are detailed below.

The Importance of Relationships With Adult Men in Adolescence

Eight of these adolescent boys talked about how much they appreciated having the presence of a male mentor in their lives, whether as a role model, confidante, or someone who simply shared their interests. Some emphasized the importance of having an adult male with whom they could talk about specific gender-related concerns. Shaggy, a protégé, described the things he talked about with his mentor that he did not feel comfortable sharing with his mother. “. . . good example, when I hit puberty. . . . There’s no way in hell I would ever talk to my mom about that.” Another protégé, Prince, said he preferred to talk with his mentor when something was bothering him, “Cause he’s a guy and he knows about stuff. And my mom knows some stuff, but she doesn’t know about like, what goes on with a guy, really.” Pat, a protégé, said simply, “I can talk to a guy easier than to a lady. . . it just feels easier.”

Other boys spoke specifically to the need for a male role model. As Demetrious said, “I didn’t have a male role model in my life. All the male role models just. . . vanished. My father, when I was born. . . . He said I wasn’t his. My uncles and everything, they’re not. . . a positive role model.” Bubblehead, about his mentor, stated, “He’s a really good role model. An important person in my life besides my dad.” But unlike his father, who Bubblehead said “always lies” and does not “pay attention” to him, his mentor “d[id] more stuff” with him. This high level of involvement was noted by many of these boys and was part of what made their relationships with their mentors particularly meaningful.

Mentors’ Desires to Be Involved and Emotionally Connected Male Role Models

Although all of the mentors described wanting to be someone their protégés could count on, six of these men also indicated that it was important to them to serve as models of men who are able to be emotionally vulnerable and connected. These men spoke explicitly about

wanting to provide the type of emotional connection with an adult male that had been missing in their youth. For four of these men, part of the motivation for becoming a mentor was to be a different kind of adult male presence than their fathers had been for them in their own adolescence.

One mentor, Sherman, noted that although his father had been a strong presence, he had not been as consistently involved as Sherman would have liked:

Although my dad was very, very active in my life and everything. . . we usually spent the summers with him. . . . During the school year, I was mostly just raised by my mom most of my life. . . . I remember I’d always wanted a Big Brother. . . but it never worked out.

Another mentor, Stewart, after describing the bond he felt with his protégé, noted that he wanted to be more emotionally available to this boy than his stepfather had been to him:

I grew up with my stepfather, more or less. He was. . . essentially my father. . . but. . . he was a very. . . austere sort of person. . . so I don’t think I really did have the ability to go up to somebody and say this is. . . where I’m hurting or you know, this is where. . . I’m confused or need some advice. . . . So I guess in a sense. . . part of my own imagination of. . . a really good relationship I would have wanted to have. . . plays into. . . how I bring myself into the (mentoring) relationship.

Another mentor, Al, noted that he did not really “click” with his father in adolescence and had appreciated the uncles with whom he shared a closer bond in some ways. In becoming a mentor, he hoped to offer a boy the kind of connected adult male presence his uncles had been for him.

Only one mentor, Jarred, seemed to make an explicit link between emotional availability and a more positive form of masculinity. Saying “guys. . . can be real assholes,” he questioned whether it was worse for a boy to simply not have an adult male role model or to have one that modeled emotional distance in relationships, which he considered to be “destructive.” Although the others may not have been as intentional in their efforts to model more positive forms of masculinity, they did express a clear desire to offer a different kind of relationship to the next generation of boys than they had experienced with adult men in their own youth and to offer

the kind of relationship in which a broader range of emotions could be shared.

Close and Enduring Emotional Connections

Most (10) of these pairs had clearly forged deep and enduring connections, evidenced in the ways that they spoke about one another and how long they anticipated their relationships lasting. When asked what difference having his mentor in his life had made, Pedro responded, "I know that I benefit from him because I care about him a lot. Like, my second dad. . . I trust him a lot." He also poignantly prefaced these statements by saying, "I learned that. . . you can trust somebody that you really care about." Demetrious described himself as "close" to his mentor and anticipated that they would continue to grow even closer:

He knows me. He knows who I am. . . . Because he'll be bringing up stuff when we're talking too, like what happened. . . . So, it's like, he remembers things so that makes me feel that he wants to know me. . . better. . . . But I always want to know him better too.

One mentor, Al, expressed a bit of surprise at how connected he had come to feel to his protégé:

I went away for a week. . . . And I came back and. . . I missed him. . . . It's like, as much as it's difficult trying to find that few hours it's like, when you don't do it. . . . I kind of missed the kid.

It was also clear that these pairs took great pleasure in being in one another's company and felt a deep positive regard for one another. These feelings were apparent in their descriptions of one another and of their relationships. About his protégé, Frank said, "I really like him. You know, he's a good kid." Cougar noted, "He's really starting to come into his own now. He's really starting to blossom. He's. . . he's just. . . he's going to be a great, great kid you know." Gig, describing his feelings for his protégé Shaggy, said,

I kind of feel like he's another brother. . . even if he moves to California and I don't see him for five years or I don't see him for two years, when we get back together, we know so much about each other that there will always be that goofing around and there will always be that friendship.

Another mentor, Jarred, spoke about his feelings of closeness with his protégé in this way: "I

think we're both very emotionally attached to our relationship."

The adolescents' descriptions of their mentors also indicated that they cared for and felt close to them. About his mentor, Pedro said, "I care about him a lot." T. K. Williams described his mentor in this way: "He's pretty bright and cool." When asked what he was most proud of in his life, Bubblehead replied, "I have Stewart" (his mentor). Maurice described his mentor as his "best, best, best friend." Shaggy, when asked how long he imagined his relationship with his mentor would continue, replied, "until I have to go buy him adult diapers for an old folks home. I don't know. Honestly, that's probably what's going to happen."

These mentors' and youths' descriptions of their relationships convey the strength and depth of the emotional connections that had developed. These strong emotional connections seemed to be an important part of what made the relationships meaningful to both the youth and the adults. As noted above, for at least one boy (Pedro), the close connection and high level of trust he experienced with his mentor was what gave him the sense that he had "benefited" from the relationship.

A Safe Place for Vulnerability and Emotional Support

Several dimensions of these relationships seemed to contribute to them becoming a safe place for these boys to show their vulnerabilities and experience emotional support. The structural program requirement that the mentors and youth get together on a weekly or biweekly basis for at least one year laid a foundation upon which these pairs built their close connections. In addition the adults described their concerted efforts to signal to the boys that they were interested in their emotional lives and were willing to serve as a listening ear at any time should the boy decide this was something he wanted from the relationship.

The adults and the adolescents alike stressed the importance of the emotional support these relationships offered. Many of the mentors were quite pointed in their comments about their desires to be individuals their protégés could turn to for assistance and described their efforts to encourage them to do so. As one mentor, Cape, noted, "I'm very available. I have an 800 num-

ber. . .he doesn't even need a coin to put into the phone." Another, John, described his direct statements to his protégé about his desire to be there for him in a time of need: "And I said, you know I am here for you if you ever need me." This message had been clearly received by their protégés as evidenced in the boys' descriptions of their mentors. Prince, about his mentor Al, noted, "if I need somebody to talk to, I can just call [Al]. Or call his cell phone and talk to him." Demetrious, about his mentor Sherman, said, "So I could talk to him about what happens in the school. I can talk to him about what happens in my family and everything, you know."

Although these adults hoped that their offers of support would be taken up, they were also cautious not to push intimacy too quickly. Instead most waited for the youth to show some sign that he was interested in receiving this type of support. As Cougar said, "I don't push myself on him. You know, I open the door and. . .he talks and he responds." These adults described being on the look-out for even subtle cues that their protégés might like some assistance from them. Stewart described how he learned to wait out his protégé; "I think I backed off a little bit. . . in part because I've found like when he wants to talk about something he'll bring it up, or it'll come up in some subtle way." This sensitivity was at least in part a response to the mentors' awareness that many of these boys' fathers had abandoned or otherwise deeply disappointed them in some ways and that these experiences may contribute to a self-protecting reticence on the boys' part to open up too quickly. One mentor, Wolfgang, noted his protégé had not mentioned his father to him in the course of their almost 4-year relationship: "I don't know the story. I've never asked. And I think if. . .if he wanted to talk about it then he would and he hasn't."

Several of these mentors evidenced delight when recounting times their protégés had turned to them for assistance and noted these moments as milestones or turning points in the development of their relationships. John described the evolution of this aspect of his relationship with his protégé Pat and the pleasure he took in seeing that Pat had begun to rely on him in new ways:

It took at least six months for Pat to. . .start trusting me and to start coming out of [his] shell. I think at first it was cool to have a Big Brother. . .but then

after the six months, Pat started having some problems. He was running away. He was failing at school. He was arguing with his mother. . .and that's when Pat started opening up, when he started having problems at home. . . And ever since then it's just sky-rocketed. Now. . .it's like. . .at night he'll just stop [by] out of the blue.

This type of emotional support typically evolved out of and occurred within the context of a relationship that was centered on engaging in shared activities. The fact that these pairs saw each other every week, and often talked on the phone in between, meant that these mentors were sometimes there in the moment that something important was happening or when a particular issue was on their protégé's mind. The regular contact also allowed the mentors to express interest in and keep up with the details of the youth's everyday lives. As Maurice said about his mentor, "he'll call and, um, ask how I'm doing, like. . .he'll say, oh, did you do good on this test. . .if he wasn't supportive then he wouldn't. . .probably wouldn't call, and care." When asked who he turned to when he needed advice or help, Maurice replied by naming his mentor and added, "because I'm really close to him. . .I can't really explain it, just that he seems like the kind of guy I can tell something." Prince said that he and his mentor Al talk "about every other day" about "how everything's going and stuff. He asks me how is school and I ask him how his mom is doing and stuff."

Another mentor, Gig, knew something was wrong with his protégé Shaggy when he drove past Shaggy coming out of church on his birthday weekend at a time when he was supposed to have been with his father.

I picked him up. And I'm like. . ."What's going on? Did your father come?" And he's like, "No, he didn't show up again." And he kind of broke down at that point. And told me. . .how his father used to drink, and he used to throw things around the house. And things like that. . .it took two years though for him to open up to me like that.

The ongoing and consistent nature of these relationships seemed to make it easier for the boys to reach out when they needed support and also made it such that sometimes they did not have to reach out at all—their mentors were already there, waiting and ready to respond.

Learning New Ways of Dealing With Anger

Eight of these boys spoke to the specific ways that their mentors had helped them to deal with their feelings of anger, which for a few were intense and pervasive. The mentors understood these feelings as being an expectable response to being abandoned by a father, or even multiple father figures, or being relentlessly teased at school. Some of the boys described their mentoring relationship as providing them with a place where they could learn new ways of dealing with the intense feelings generated by their difficult life situations. Many also appreciated how these relationships provided pleasant diversion from these stresses, offering them a chance to simply have fun and get away from their problems for a while.

One protégé, Maurice, spoke to the respite his mentoring relationship had provided:

cause when you're doing something. . . you're thinking about. . . what you're doing. . . so. . . less time to think of bad stuff. Or less time to. . . worry about little things that you don't need to get angry over. Cause there's something else you can do instead.

For others, their mentors served as sounding boards, allowing them to release the strong feelings that built up inside of them. Prince noted that having Al as his mentor was important because “. . . if you want, you can vent to somebody and not just like take it out on somebody and hurt them.” For Shaggy, talking with his mentor Gig helped him to “get some of the anger out of the way.”

In addition to being a kind of pressure release, Shaggy said that talking about his feelings out loud with Gig also helped him “figure it out for [him]self” and created opportunities for Gig to offer his perspective on what was going on as well, which was something Shaggy valued. Such instances allowed the mentors to offer suggestions for alternative ways of dealing with these feelings. Stewart had overheard his protégé Bubblehead “being very defiant” with his mother and “calling her names” and being “bossy toward his brother” and had started trying to help Bubblehead interact with them in a different way. Bubblehead said that Stewart had encouraged him to try to back off a bit when he is angry at his mother: “So he just tells me to just go along with it and just try to treat her a little better.” Bubblehead said he had been “lis-

tening” to this advice: “It’s helping me. It gets to me. . . it goes through me and it tells me that I have to be good to my mom.” T. K. Williams attributed the decrease in his fighting at school to his relationship with his mentor who taught him to “tell the person that I don’t want to fight them and walk away.”

A few of these adolescents indicated that they imagined dire consequences for themselves had they not been matched with their mentors, as well as for other boys who do not have an adult to whom they can turn for support. For example, when asked to imagine what his life would have been like had he not met his mentor, Shaggy replied,

if I didn't have anybody to look to, then it would be crap. . . . I'd probably be in some sort of detention center. . . . Mainly because I wouldn't have anybody to really talk to. Cause I don't like talking to my mother about my problems. And I don't have my father to talk about my problems all the time. So I probably wouldn't have taken the passive route of dealing with my problems, I'd probably. . . just still beating people up.

Prince, imagining what it would be like for a boy without a mentor or someone like a mentor in his life, said

It would just all build up and it. . . could probably kill him. Like, all the stress and stuff on the heart and everything. It could also kill him by like, their work. . . . Cause if they keep thinking. . . the same thing like, oh, I just want to kill this kid like, things like that. . . then they'll fail their grades and it'll kill them in like, school and stuff.

For several of these boys, their expressions of anger had repeatedly gotten them into trouble at school and at home. For example, Bubblehead had been referred to the mentoring program after having physically lashed out at another student in school who had been teasing him for some time. These boys’ mentors responded to their strong feelings with understanding and a desire to help. This had contributed to several of these boys developing a greater capacity to express their emotions in more productive ways. Importantly, the mentoring relationships had also provided a welcome distraction from their challenging life circumstances, which for some helped take a bit of the edge off of their anger.

Walking the Tightrope: Being Emotionally Connected. . . in a Manly Sort of Way

In the midst of these descriptions of connectiveness and vulnerability were also small pock-

ets of discomfort on the part of a just a few (3) of these mentors about revealing the emotional aspects of these relationships. Alongside descriptions of concerted efforts to create safe places for emotional vulnerability were qualifications that seemed intended to distinguish these forms of emotional intimacy from those that are more typically feminine. The descriptions of closeness and emotional connection seemed to threaten, or at least run the risk of calling into question, the mentors' masculinity, whether in their own eyes or those of the female interviewer. For example, one mentor, Cougar, described how he consciously tried not to engage his protégé in conversations around objectifying women, saying, "I don't want to foster that type of clowning around." He said that he wanted to teach his protégé "respect," adding, "I don't think I had that when I was a kid. . . I learned about sex on the streets and. . . reading the *Playboy*. . . we probably weren't very respectful." Yet Cougar also made the effort to let the interviewer know that he enjoyed what he called "oogling girls" as much as the next guy with his statement, "I enjoy that as much as anybody if not more." At another point in the interview, after describing his pleasure when his protégé Pedro had shared his vulnerability by letting him know that Pedro was nervous about something, Cougar said, "I definitely think it's important for him to see the uh. . . it's okay for men to be vulnerable." He then quickly added, "I don't know if we've had any cry fests at all."

Another mentor Gig, after relaying the story of how his protégé Shaggy had opened up to him about his relationship with his father and highlighting this experience as a turning point in their relationship, was quick to point out that as a "man's man" he does not "share feelings": "And he [Shaggy] . . . even to this day. . . won't open up all the time. But then again. . . I'm more of a man's man. I'm not. . . a very openly emotional person, I guess. . . I don't share feelings." At another point in the interview, after having just detailed how Shaggy felt like another brother to him and he imagined that they would always remain in some kind of contact, Gig added: "And you know with guys it's different than it is with girls, where you don't have th[ese] lovey-dovey. . . emotional conversations. But you know, just someone who you know will be there for you if you need them there."

Al, during his interview together with his protégé Prince, shared with him what he had said in his earlier individual interview about missing Prince when he was out of town one weekend and thus did not get to see him that week. This time, with Prince in the room, his telling of this experience had an added dimension of self-consciousness as he stumbled through an attempt to tell Prince directly what he had much more easily shared with the interviewer in private—that he had missed him while he was away: "like when I went to Las Vegas. . . for a while. . . I mean, as *corny* [emphasis added] as this is going to sound. . . if I haven't talked to you in a few days, I like. . . talking to you, see what's going on." Al still let Prince know how he felt, yet here he seems aware that Prince might experience Al's missing him as *corny*, perhaps even unmanly.

In these narratives, a few of these mentors walked a fine line between demonstrating how they were actively challenging prohibitions on emotional expressivity in males in their relationships with these boys while also making it clear, at least to the interviewer if not to themselves, that they had not gone so far as to engage in what might appear to be more conventionally feminine forms of emotional intimacy. This self-consciousness about the more emotional dimensions of these relationships was not mirrored in the narratives of the adolescent boys, who were more unequivocal in their expression of their appreciation of the emotional support provided by their mentors.

Discussion

As one might expect, engaging in social activities was certainly cited as being important to these pairs, as such activities comprise the central structure of these relationships. More striking, however, were the active efforts on the part of the male mentors to be emotionally available to the adolescent boys, a stance which some contrasted with that of the adult men in their lives during their own adolescence. Further, the descriptions of these relationships offered by both the adolescents and the adults paint a rich picture of the ways that the pairs experienced their emotional connectedness as facilitating the boys' emotional development and contributing to greater feelings of self-confidence. Also notable in a few of these adult men's narratives

was an underlying tension between desiring and experiencing emotional vulnerability in these relationships and concern for protecting one's masculinity.

Contrary to more conventional notions of male relationships as being centered primarily around shared activities—"the closeness is in the doing" (Swain, 1989)—these mentoring relationships were also sites of overt emotional closeness and expressiveness. This finding challenges current assertions that male mentoring relationships may be more effective if greater emphasis is placed on shared activities than on emotional closeness (Bogat & Liang, 2005; Darling et al., 2006). The adult male mentors in this study stressed their desire to offer a relational context within which these boys could experience a range of emotions and receive adult assistance as they traversed the bumpy road of adolescence. They also described their active efforts to make themselves available to their protégés and to watch for moments when these youth might be willing to take them up on their offers of support. The boys cited the emotional closeness and emotional support they experienced as particularly meaningful aspects of these relationships and, in some cases, part of what made these relationships distinct in their lives.

The shared activities did appear to facilitate the development of these close ties as did the program expectation that the pairs spend a considerable amount of time together on a consistent basis. Another supporting structural aspect of these relationships was the one-to-one matching, or the sense that it was these adults' role to be there, literally and in the more figurative emotional sense, for these adolescents. The one-to-one and ongoing nature of community-based youth mentoring relationships may provide special opportunities for men to engage with boys in emotionally close and supportive relationships in ways that challenge conventional gender ideologies regarding emotional vulnerability and expressivity. Adolescent boys and adult men have been found to be less likely to develop supportive connections within their naturally occurring social networks (Belle, 1989; Pugliesi & Shook, 1998). This may be due in part to boys' adhering to conventional masculinity ideologies (Pleck, 1995) and thus being reluctant to display their vulnerabilities. For these boys, having a mentor meant that they did

not have to work as hard to reach out when they needed help because their mentors were on the look-out for such opportunities to step in and offer their assistance. Such positive experiences may assist boys in learning when and how to rely on others in times of stress, a component of emotional well-being (Barrera & Prelow, 2000), perhaps making it more likely that they will be inclined and able to seek out such support in the future.

These male mentors described actively striving to foster an emotionally connected relationship with their protégés. Some were responding to their own experiences of feeling the absence of a close relationship with an adult male in their youth coupled with their memories of longing for such a connection. At the same time, a few of these mentors conveyed awareness that the emotional closeness they had experienced in these relationships may be seen as more feminine, and they took steps to distinguish their behaviors from those that might occur between two females (e.g., sharing feelings or having "cryfests"). So while they were in some ways actively working against more conventional notions of masculinity in their mentoring relationships, some of these men still enacted them at times in the context of these interviews by devaluing and distancing themselves from more traditionally feminine forms of emotional expressiveness (O'Neil, 1981). Still, their narratives indicated that they were clearly working to tune-in and respond to the emotional lives of these boys. These efforts appeared to create safe places for the boys to receive support and be more emotionally vulnerable, perhaps mitigating the fear and distrust Way (2004) has found some urban adolescent boys experience in peer friendships. Also notable was the absence of this tension surrounding revealing these forms of emotional closeness in the boys' interviews. This may be due in part to the class and ethnic backgrounds of these boys. Way (2004) has found that adolescent boys of color emphasize emotional sharing and commitment when describing their male friendships and suggests this may be due in part to less of an adherence to more traditional forms of masculinity within their communities than is found among the White middle-class boys more typically studied. Walker (1994), in her work on adult men's friendships, has also noted that working-class men are less likely to conform to gendered

norms around emotionality in these close relationships.

For several of the boys, these relationships helped them to deal more effectively with what they described as disruptive and problem-causing experiences of anger. For some, their anger and their responses to it, such as fighting with their peers or being disrespectful to their teachers, had gotten them into significant trouble at school and home. Their relationships with their mentors provided a welcome distraction from the difficulties in their lives and allowed them to have fun with someone whose company they enjoyed. The mentors also described finding ways to naturally embed opportunities for the boys to vent their feelings of anger within their activities so that they could then help the boys develop alternative ways of coping with these feelings. The boys described feeling safe turning to their mentors for help with their emotional lives and expressed relief that they had this kind of relationship in their lives.

The boys also emphasized how meaningful it was to them that their mentors were male and noted that these men offered support they felt an adult woman or a female peer could not. Colarossi and Eccles (2003) found that support from same-sex adults was more significant for adolescents and suggested that "a same-sex provider-recipient pair, especially between adolescents and adult role models, may increase the effects of support" (p. 27). Emotional support from adult men may be particularly meaningful for boys in adolescence. Adolescence has been identified as a time when socialization toward adherence to conventional gender ideologies is heightened (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Levant, 2001). This study suggests that mentoring relationships can offer opportunities for adult men to serve as positive role models for emotional expressiveness and to normalize feelings of vulnerability for boys. Experiencing emotional closeness and emotional support with adult male mentors may offer boys alternatives to the more constraining notions of masculine stoicism and extreme self-sufficiency. Further, given that aggressive behaviors are often normalized for adolescent boys (Levant, 2001), contributing to heightened engagement in socially deviant behaviors such as fighting, adult male mentors may help boys deal with feelings of aggression and anger in ways that are more prosocial and less self-compromising.

For the adult men, these relationships afforded them opportunities to experience emotional closeness and to provide emotional support to their protégés. One of the reasons why boys tend to report that they rely mostly on females, their mothers in particular, for emotional support (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003) may be the relative paucity of adult males who are both willing and capable of offering more meaningful support. Being a mentor may provide men with rare chances to become more connected to their own emotional lives and to hone their skills and boost their capacities to serve as emotional supports to others. Thus, engaging in positive emotional bonds with boys through mentoring may contribute to increases in psychological well-being for the adult men as well.

Several limitations to this study should be noted. It is small in both size and scope. The findings presented here are limited in their application to mentoring relationships, or programs, more generally. The pairs were recruited from one mentoring program which was known to adhere to the highest levels of recommended best practices for such programs. Further, only highly successful and enduring matches were interviewed for this study, allowing for a close examination of the mentoring process between boys and men when it is going well. However, estimates are that more than half of all mentoring relationships dissolve within the first few months (Rhodes, 2002), so the relationships studied here are likely exceptional in many ways, or at least not what could be considered a typical mentoring relationship established through a formal program. Thus, the emotional closeness and support experienced within these pairs may be more uncommon and speak to the potential for these processes in male mentoring relationships rather than being indicative of such relationships more generally. Finally, most of these mentoring relationships were cross-cultural relationships, with boys of color from varying racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds paired with White middle-class mentors. However, among the youth there were not a sufficient number of cases of each cultural group to explore these differences in depth.

Still, this examination of a small set of male community-based youth mentoring relationships does offer some insight into the ways that male mentoring relationships can possibly serve as sites for the promotion of positive and emo-

tionally connected forms of masculinity for adolescent boys. The findings here call into question previous assertions in the youth mentoring literature that boys may be less interested in or in need of emotional support in their mentoring relationships. In fact, such assumptions may lead us to overlook a potentially powerful dimension of male youth mentoring relationships. The relationships studied here suggest that close and enduring male mentoring relationships may provide adolescent boys with less constricting and more nontraditional forms of masculinity, particularly with regard to emotional disclosures and expressivity. Such experiences may be one of the mechanisms through which mentoring can promote positive psychosocial outcomes for boys. This study also suggests that some adult men may be drawn to mentoring in part because of the potential for engaging with male youth in an emotionally connected way and modeling more positive forms of masculinity.

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Received August 8, 2006

Revision received April 17, 2007

Accepted April 23, 2007 ■