Young People's Experience of Mentoring: Building Trust and Attachments

RUDI DALLOS
University of Plymouth, UK

PENNY COMLEY-ROSS
Promise Mentoring Scheme, Somerset, UK

ABSTRACT

The study was conducted in the context of PROMISE – a voluntary scheme, in the southwest of England which provides mentors for a young person for a period of up to 2 years. Predominantly these youngsters had experienced a range of difficulties in their lives including periods in care, severe problems in their families, trouble with the police and mental health problems. Each young person is allocated a mentor who has regular contact with them offering activities, support and informal counselling. Although the general response to the scheme has been positive it was felt that there was a gap of understanding about how the young people experienced the scheme. An exploratory qualitative study was commissioned to explore how a sample of the young people, who had been involved in the mentoring scheme for a substantial period, experienced the process of mentoring. The study involved interviews with six young people and group discussions with mentors and staff. Generally, the experience was reported by the young people to be highly favourable with the development of a positive, consistent, available, trusting and caring relationship cited as key ingredients. These findings were supported by discussion with the mentors. The study suggests that attachment theory is helpful in explaining the mentoring process and in promoting ideas for future developments.

KEYWORDS

attachment, experience, mentoring, qualitative, research

RUDI DALLOS is Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Programme Director of the Plymouth University DClin Psychology training course. He specializes in family therapy and work with adolescents, and has written about and conducted research in these areas.

CONTACT: Rudi Dallos, Programme Director, Clinical Teaching Unit, University of Plymouth, 4/5 Rowe St, Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK. [E-mail: r.dallos@plymouth.ac.uk]

PENNY COMLEY-ROSS is a Researcher, Mentor and Consultant to the Promise Mentoring Scheme, Somerset, UK.

MENTORING IS A concept that has a long history. One of the earliest examples is the relationship between Socrates and his pupil Plato. A less profound example might be the relationship between the comic characters, Batman and Robin. The contexts in which mentoring occurs have varied including; education, for example, using older pupils as mentors for younger ones; sports; music; literature; and, importantly for this study, work with troubled young people. Mentoring is not a strictly defined term and included in the definition of mentoring are the following: a relationship usually between an older and younger person, a relationship which is based on acceptance and support, a relationship which aims to assist and foster the potential of the younger partner, which avoids attempts to minimize the unhelpful aspects of a power differential, is relatively long-term as opposed to temporary, is non-expert or overtly therapeutic in that change is a hoped for outcome, but is regarded as a desired by-product of the relationship rather than the relationship being shaped by pre-defined goals for change. An alternative definition of mentoring is far more restrictive. Business mentors, and mentors as encouraged by some schools often aim for very clear and specific outcomes, such as encouraging an up-and-coming executive to achieve the next stage in their career development, or maintaining a pupil's interest in school through to external examinations. When PROMISE was set up, there was a conscious decision to go with the less prescriptive version. The underlying philosophy bears similarities to Carl Rogers' (1955) non-directive counselling approach.

Studies of mentoring

A number of studies support the idea that mentoring can offer an experience of a positive and supportive relationship which can help to make up for the lack of such experiences in children's lives (Evans & Ave, 2000; Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999). Some studies have suggested that an important aspect of mentoring is that it offers the opportunity to have positive role models (Evans & Ave, 2000; Haensley & Parsons, 1993). Other approaches emphasize that mentoring has therapeutic as well as practical outcomes, for example, Llewelyn (1988) found that therapeutic ingredients, such as insight, reassurance/relief, problem solution and personal contact were mentioned as important features of the mentoring relationship. Importantly, it has also been suggested that mentoring can foster resilience, for example, Evans, Wilson, Hansson, and Hungerford (1997) found that the relationship could foster self-esteem and build a reservoir of success and positive experience that the young person could refer back to when faced by inevitable problems in their lives.

Several studies have also been conducted to explore the outcomes of mentoring programmes. Rhodes (2002) offered an important review, which identified massive differences between schemes and found these to be due to differences in the selection of mentors and the need for long-term, as opposed to short-term, relationships. Other studies consider details, for example, the need for considerable contact, closeness and an extended length of relationship (Dubois & Neville, 1997; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). In summary, these studies suggest that in mentoring the *relationship* is central and creates the opportunity for change, rather than change predominantly occurring due to specific events within the relationship. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) conclude that, generally, the longer a mentoring relationship lasted, the greater the benefits derived from it.

Theories of mentoring

The inspiration for this study was that, despite evidence in support of the effectiveness of mentoring, there is surprisingly little in the way of theory or research to guide its application and inspire its future development. As with many therapeutic approaches,

research has often concentrated on evaluation and outcome: whether it works rather than on an exploration of the process or details of how it works. This article describes a qualitative study, which was inspired by two theoretical approaches: Erikson's (1959, 1968) life-stage theory and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1982). The study was intended to examine to what extent the theories could embrace and make sense of the experiences of mentors and mentees.

Erikson's psychosocial model and attachment theory both emphasize the social aspects of children's development and also the importance of the influence of figures that a child can learn to trust. Erikson (1959, 1968) emphasized how the development of the child's internal world, including their sense of self, self-worth, ability to engage with and commit to others was intimately bound up with the way that key development issues were handled in their families. He proposed a model of development, from childhood into old age, that featured the idea that progress through life can be seen in terms of key transitional stages. Each of these was seen in terms of a conflux of existential dilemmas and, importantly, Erikson emphasized that the family context, and in particular the development of trust was critical in how successfully or otherwise children negotiated these. Erikson thought that adolescence represents the threshold into adult life and requires the young person to start to think about what he or she wants to be, what kind of work, skills and friendships the young person wants. Typically, it also coincides with young people needing to make important decisions about what kind of occupation they will pursue and what education or training they will need. This requires them to contemplate different roles, life-styles, interests and, arguably, this underlies the concern that adolescents have with image and appearance. He described the central issue in terms of identity as contrasted to role confusion: whether the young person can start to develop some clear sense of self, role and position in the world. In early adulthood the central concern was seen to be intimacy as opposed to isolation, and in middle age the central issue was seen to be that of generativity as opposed to stagnation. Importantly, Erikson emphasized the need to help the next generation, to become less self-centred and to concentrate on nurturing younger people – handing on our skills and wisdom. There is an important connection between the stages around adolescence and young adulthood and middle age (Rhodes, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1992). It is suggested that it is essential for the person at mid-life to feel able to hand on skills and support to young people, who in turn need that guidance and support. In this light, mentoring is seen as a mutually beneficial experience: both the mentee and mentor need a successful experience of this relationship to complete their respective life stages (Haensley & Parsons, 1993).

As in Erikson's theory, attachment theory holds as central the initial development of trust within the infant. Though the dilemmas that Erikson sees us as facing through life have different emphases, they can all be seen as revolving around issues of trust and attachment. The young infant is seen as totally dependent on its parents to provide its basic physical and emotional needs and to keep it safe. There is seen to be an evolutionary need to stay connected and attached to the parents (Bowlby, 1973, 1982). Again, like Erikson's approach, how these needs are met is seen to shape the nature of the child's evolving sense of self and identity. A wide body of research and clinical evidence (Ainsworth, 1989; Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) has now been amassed which shows that children differ in the attachment patterns that they develop. Infants who have their physical and emotional needs met in a consistent and empathetic way develop a secure attachment style – a secure sense of the world and along with this a positive view of their self-worth, a belief that they are worthy of love and care. In contrast, infants who experience insecure early experiences – either a lack of protection and care, or inconsistent care, develop either an avoidant or ambivalent pattern

of attachment, respectively. Infants show an avoidant pattern by appearing to avoid or deny their attachment needs – to develop a 'stiff upper lip'. Ambivalent styles are characterized by behaviours alternating between avoidance and clingy dependence. Along with these attachment styles of behaviour children are seen as developing characteristic 'working models' or beliefs. A secure style is associated with a belief that the world is basically a safe place and a positive view of oneself as worthy of love and affection. The avoidant pattern is characterized by a sense that one must learn not to depend on others and a more negative sense of oneself as not worthy of love and affection. The ambivalent style appears to be characterized by uncertainty and confusion, and alternation between seeing oneself as lovable/unlovable. Bowlby's original studies, again confirmed by a large body of subsequent research, have supported a strong relationship between insecure attachment experiences and the development of mental health problems and antisocial or offending behaviour (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, 1989; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Sroufe, 1995). For example, the child who has experienced rejection may feel that others cannot be trusted, that they are cruel and that he or she is unlovable.

More recent research has explored these beliefs in terms of how children come to develop characteristic stories about their experiences which once established are maintained through adult life (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Interestingly, it is not only the content that is predictable, but also the organization of these stories. For example, these early experiences appear to shape how we remember our past and in turn come to filter or process new relational experiences. In effect, the past can be seen, in part, to hold the future hostage. People who have had secure experiences are able to see their past and current experiences in terms of a convincing balance of positives and negatives. In contrast, those who have experienced avoidant patterns in their families come to dismiss the importance, or relevance of their emotional needs, find it hard to remember past emotional experiences and avoid thinking about current relationships. Finally, those who have experienced ambivalent dynamics are seen to develop a preoccupation with emotions and relationships. Furthermore, the experience of inconsistency leads these young people to alternate between a clingy behaviour and over-concern with their feelings, with attempts to separate from, or even attack their carer and deny their feelings, such as those of anger and sadness.

Attachment theory primarily focuses on early relationships in the family, and predominantly between the child and the mother. However, there is considerable debate about the relative importance of family relationships and other relationships, for example, friends, lovers, colleagues and mentor figures (Dallos & Draper, 2005). Here Erikson's theory and attachment theory part company to some extent, because for Erikson other relationships, such as the mentoring one, are extremely important. This question is of central importance to this study because a central belief of mentoring is that the experience can promote, repair or even build a new sense of security and trust.

Aims of the study
The trigger for this study was that there is a widespread belief within and outside the mentoring scheme that it is having a positive effect, yet little in the way of qualitative knowledge from the young people's experiences of how this occurs.

First, the main aim of the study was to explore the experience of mentoring for a group of young people who had undergone this for a substantial period: 1–2 years. More specifically, it was to identify what they had found to be particularly helpful as opposed to unhelpful. This meant that the young people taking part had all had a reasonably good experience of the scheme otherwise they would not have continued to be involved

(further studies are needed of the experience of young people for whom mentoring is less successful and who drop-out).

Second, the aim was to make sense of their accounts and move towards developing a theory of the mentoring process. Part of this was to explore the possible relevance of attachment and psychosocial perspectives to the mentoring process.

The mentors

The mentors were all volunteers from a variety of backgrounds, such as teaching, the police, and counselling. They had received a period of training, which partly focused on Rogerian ideas (Rogers, 1955). Their contact with the young people varied, but was usually on a minimum of a weekly basis for 2 hours or so. In many cases, it was much more and included frequent telephone contact. The contact included activities, outings, time at home with the mentor, sports, gardening and talking casually as well as about problems and feelings. An important indicator of the relevance of the scheme was that many of the young people who had taken part in the scheme were recommending it to other young people. Initially, there had been an anticipation that some youngsters would be reluctant to engage in the scheme, although generally it was found that they were in fact, 'quite eager to give it a go and very few turned down the opportunity' (Salter, personal communication, 2003). Moreover, it was clear that many of them were clearly now approaching it with positive expectations.

Method

Design

Because the aims of this study were to investigate the experience of mentoring in terms of the meanings it held for young people and their mentors it was decided that a qualitative study was most appropriate. Of the qualitative approaches that are currently available a form of interpretative theme analysis was chosen. Theme analyses, like grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provide a picture of the central themes or clusters of understandings that encapsulate an area of experience (Osborne & Smith, 1998). In contrast to grounded theory, IPA allows the researcher to import prior theory into the analysis of the interviews for use as a preliminary analytical framework. In addition, some aspects of a discourse analysis were included: a focus on how people talk about their experiences in terms of what they chose to omit, appear to find painful, avoid or obliterate from memory. The analysis involves an interpretative component, which requires reflection by the researchers on their assumptions, organizing theories and personal connections with the material.

The main study consisted of a cross-sectional (one-off) interview with six young people who were engaged in mentoring. These young people had all been with a mentor for a substantial period (usually over 12 months). This implies that this was a sample of young people for whom the experience had been positive and useful otherwise they would not have remained in the relationship. Two group discussions with a group of mentors and staff involved in the mentoring scheme also took place and were used to inform the analysis and interpretation of the interviews with the young people.

Participants

The six young people consisted of three young women and three young men between the ages of 13 and 17 years. All of the young people had experienced serious family disruptions and separation, and had been in care. Four of them were in care at the time of the interviews, all had experienced a breakdown in the relationship with at least one

of their parents and had little contact with one or both parents. Five of the youngsters had gone through a breakdown in their relationship with their mothers and the mother of one youngster had died. Perhaps slightly unusually, all the children had more contact with their fathers, although one had also ceased contact. In short, they embody a lot of the common characteristics of children who have been looked after by social services (Carlson et al., 1989; Rutter, 1995). They had all experienced a highly disrupted and insecure home life, a series of relationships with professionals in which it is difficult to develop any sense of continuity because staff come and go unpredictably, generally negative relationships with their parents and experience of seeing very negative and destructive relationships between adults, especially their parents.

The young people volunteered to engage in the interviews and were encouraged by a small payment for their participation. It was made clear that the interviews were confidential and their identities would not be revealed in any publications produced. However, they were asked if they would mind their mentors knowing about the broad content of what they had said. In fact, all of them emphasized that they were keen that their mentor did know because they 'wanted them to know how much they had benefited from it'. This seemed like a significant finding even before the 'research paper' had started!

The interview

A semi-structured interview was used which attempted to enable the young people to articulate their experiences from their own perspectives. The interview started with a general overview of their past and current situation. This was followed by an invitation for them to describe their experience of mentoring. This was developed with questions about what their expectations had been, what they had found helpful or unhelpful, whether and how they felt they had changed as a result of the experience, how they felt their mentor saw them and how they had changed, what helped the changes to occur and what if any impact it had on their abilities to form and manage relationships. Finally, they were invited to talk about what they would do or say to other youngsters about the experience and why they might recommend it or otherwise.

The interviews lasted about 45 minutes and were tape-recorded.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a form of IPA (Osborne & Smith, 1998). This seeks to draw out themes or clusters of meanings that encapsulate shared understandings and beliefs regarding an area of experience. The process involves paying close attention to the text, engaging in a detailed initial coding of concepts, clustering the initial codes into themes and a systematic cross-comparison of the emerging themes to develop final themes that encapsulate what the participants have said. The analysis acknowledges the importance of an interpretative element, in that researchers attempt to use and reflect on their own beliefs, assumptions and guiding theoretical ideas.

Each transcript was read several times with initial codes made on a roughly line-by-line basis. These were gradually collected into clusters of initial themes. These guided the analysis of the subsequent transcripts and so on. Furthermore, the process of 'constant comparison' was incorporated from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby the themes were continually compared and contrasted with each other, and attempts were made to see whether the themes could be combined or needed to be further subdivided.

Validation   The analysis was supplemented and enhanced by means of two rounds of discussion with mentors and staff involved in the service. These consisted of group

374

Table 1. Shared themes

Good object (Mentor)	Nice person, Warmth Kindness, Voluntary, Hard-working
Good relationship	Confidentiality, on my side Different to professional relationships Different to family relationships
Attachment	Care about me, acceptance Availability, Reliance on the mentor Dependence, reciprocity
Building trust	Actions speak louder than words Being held in mind Putting themselves out for me Breaking the rules – going beyond the 'normal' Having fun
Facilitating change	Giving advice, Listening to me Talking things through Promoting areas of change Behaviour, Lifting mood – anger Changing thinking – better view of self and of others Get on better with others

discussions (first with 10 mentors and staff, and finally with 40 mentors and staff) in which they considered the analysis including extracts of text. The legitimacy of the themes proposed was discussed and connections were made with the mentors' own experiences. The discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Results

Interviews
From the analysis of the interviews the following five major themes eventually emerged (Table 1).

Good object   This theme was characterized by the young people's descriptions of the mentor in positive terms. In contrast, they described a distinct lack of people they felt positive about in their lives prior to the mentoring relationships:

> I thought they might be boring and they might be nasty . . . I thought she sounded really nice and she came and picked me up . . . I thought she was a really nice lady and she introduced me to her pets, I love animals . . . (Luke, 16)

> The first day I met her, I actually thought she looks interesting, I knew I was going to get on with her on the first day and all the rest of the times, because she is good. (Adam, 16)

> I thought she was really nice. She's really kind hearted. She helps me along the way, like when I moved from . . . to . . ., she helped me move. (Joan, 16)

Good relationship   The nature of the relationship was seen to vary by the young people but contained the shared view that it was a 'good' relationship. For some young people

375

this implied it was like a relationship with a parent, whilst for some it was important that it was not like a relationship with a parent. Running through this was the idea that what made it different was that it was 'good'; in fact, when talking about the mentor being like a 'mum' this was more what they had hoped a mum might be like rather than one that they had actually experienced.

> Well I have never got on so well with anyone else as with her, . . . is better than dad even, I wouldn't say that she is my mentor, I would say that she is a mum, I wouldn't class her as a mentor, certainly a second mum . . . She is special, she has a gift that makes people happy. She does nag a bit when I don't go to school, but in a way that is because she cares, that's how I think she is a mum, what she is a mum, what she says is I will classify you as one of my kids. (Andrew, 16)

> I don't see her as a mentor, I see her as a friend . . . it's one person that has stood by me . . . Sometimes she is like a mum, sometimes like a big sister . . . my mum would never be like that, honest, doesn't even know what the word is . . . (Annie, 15)

> Having someone to talk to, going out . . . I don't see my dad, and I didn't talk with my step-dad and I didn't really talk to my mum. (Adrian, 15)

Reciprocity was also important in this, even simple things like the children taking some trouble to offer some sweets back to their mentor or more practical help.

> At the moment she has got splints on her wrists because she has got something wrong with her wrists and I have been helping her wash her car and do her garden, and she is always touched when I come around with a box of chocolates in my hand. She is very grateful for me being able to help. (Katie, 16)

Importantly, the relationship did not just exist when the mentor and mentee were together, but there was a sense that an important part of the relationship involved being held in mind and also knowing what the mentor might say or suggest:

> I've had a couple of arguments but they didn't last long (with the mentor). . . . It didn't fall apart (their relationship), there is so much of me in her and so much of her in me. (Annie, 15)

Attachment   Attachment contains the idea of an emotional connection and sense of reliance on the mentor. In attachment theory it carries the idea of feeling that there is someone you can turn to when you are frightened, anxious, threatened or fearful. For the young people here this could be seen not just specifically in what they said, but in that their talk about the mentor was within a context of knowing that he or she would be available when and if they needed them:

> They help you with a lot of things. If you've got any problems they help you to sort out things and that if I'm in a bad mood I phone my mentor and she comes and sees me, if I'm upset she comes and sees me. (Joan, 16)

> It's one person that has stood by me . . . she stopped me from slitting my wrists . . . she put me back on the rails . . . She doesn't tell me what to do she just helps me, advises me, if I have a dilemma. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't be here now, I would be six feet under. (Annie, 15)

> She has helped me in quite a lot of ways . . . when my mum passed away, this is the biggest problem I have ever had . . . she was supporting me every day, making sure that I was alright. If I had a major problem she would be there in less than 15 minutes. (Andrew, 16)

The young people varied in the extent to which they indicated a dependency on their mentors or anxieties about what would happen if and when the mentoring ended. Some spoke of having less need for their mentor, but there was an underlying sense that most were not able to think of a time in the future without their mentors being there for them:

> I used to see her once a week, but now I don't need her as much, I think the last time I saw her was about 3 or 4 weeks ago . . . (Annie, 15)

> She said she will always see me . . . Scary (seeing her less than once a week) . . . I'm still thinking that I would like being closer to her, next door neighbours . . . (Andrew, 16)

Building trust　This theme was in many ways one of the most interesting and confirms what many practitioners had said informally about the need to 'go the extra mile' for these young people. It was difficult to find the best way to incorporate the wide range of subthemes that make up this major theme. However, it felt most appropriate to cluster this set of subthemes together to contain the features of what the mentor did to foster the development of the relationship. It contains the idea of trust being built on the basis of availability and being able to rely on the mentor and also more psychological features, such as being held in mind.

Importantly, these two features come together in that actions imply what the mentor might think and feel. For example, 'breaking the rules' by doing something that somehow was not totally respectable or following all the rules was seen as important. In effect, the young people often took this to show that they were worth the mentor taking a risk:

> It was about 2 to 3 months before I trusted her . . . I gave her tests, mum said not to let her smoke. She never told mum I smoked that day. (Annie, 15)

> I think it was to do with the first day . . . she said have you got a fag . . . said 'I don't know about you but I need a cup of tea' . . . we weren't supposed to go back on the first day but we went back to her house, we sat down, chilled out. Had a cup of tea, watched a couple of videos, got on really good. She obviously trusted me to go to her house. (Andrew, 16)

> When she took me out, and we talked and she asked me what my hobbies were like and the next time she took me out to this proper Royal Naval base at Y . . . and we watched the air display, and we saw all these planes and helicopters fighting using blanks. . . . Really I thought I didn't really know her, I thought well she done this in her own time and I thought it was really nice of her and that's the reason I like her. (Luke, 16)

Many of the young people were absolutely bowled over by the fact that the mentor asked them to join in family celebrations, barbecues or trips with friends. Being part of something like a family was very important to the young people:

> I thought she was a really nice lady and she introduced me to her pets, I love animals . . . two Labradors, I have fallen in love with them. (Luke, 16)

> We used to go out together, all of us (her three children) and her partner, to the park in B . . . got on fine, all of us. (Andrew, 16)

> I gelled into her family because I have seen various members of her family. (Katie, 16)

Importantly, many of the young people described that the relationship with their mentor had generalized so that they were now more able to trust others and form good relationships:

> When I first went to W (care home) I didn't talk to anyone for about a month. I was very quiet, now I can talk to her about anything, I know I can trust her. She has managed to make me trust other people. I talk to her about everything. (Andrew, 16)

He goes on to describe a sense of reciprocity in the mentor that has in turn allowed him to help her as a way of fostering his self-respect:

> There was a time when she was telling me everything. In a way it's helped her, she has had a couple of problems and I have suggested things and she has said; 'Yes, I will do that'. (Andrew, 16)

Facilitating change   Perhaps this theme contains some of the most surprising aspects of the research. It contains within it subthemes of giving advice and suggestions, taking a directive stance and simply being available. More specifically, the young people mentioned that the mentor would listen, helping with emotional problems and offering validation and acceptance. Above all, the young people felt certain that the mentor had prompted changes in their lives in a variety of ways. Some of what the young people said overlaps with the other themes of attachment and building relationships:

> When I saw her I was wearing these hideous clothes and stupid hairstyle and there was one time she said; 'You ought to do something about your hair and you don't look too good, and those clothes, get some decent clothes'. I don't think she was being cheeky. I thought she was saying it to make me look better, giving me advice. I did what she said. (Andrew, 16)

> She's special, she has a gift that makes everyone happy. She does nag a bit when I don't go to school, but in a way I like that because that means she cares, That's how I think she is a mum. What she says is, I will classify you as one of my kids. (Andrew, 16)

> She made me more open-minded of other people, just having someone different to talk to . . . I have had a couple of arguments (with the mentor) but they didn't last very long . . . It didn't fall apart. There is so much of me in her and so much of her in me. Our personalities clicked straight away. (Annie, 15)

> She has helped me a lot . . . talking to me and telling me what will happen if I get a criminal record . . . It didn't get up my nose . . . I listened to her because I knew she was trying to help. If I knew that she was doing it to be sarcastic I wouldn't have listened to her. I knew she was trying to help that is the reason I sat down and listened to her. (Luke, 16)

Perhaps one of the most poignant accounts was of young people describing how the mentor had been able to give them a sense of being useful and valuable people. In some sense what they said resembles ideas from co-counselling that growth is facilitated by a person not only receiving help but having a sense of being able to help others:

> There was a time when she was telling me everything. In a way it's helped her, she has had a couple of problems and I have suggested things and she has said 'Yes, I will do that'. (Andrew, 16)

378

Discussion

The most striking finding of this study was the extent to which the young people felt that the mentoring experience had been positive and had contributed to producing positive changes in their lives. It was clear that for these young people it was a new experience. Part of this new experience appeared to be a sense of positive parenting and there was some indication that the young people did in some ways see the mentor as, for example, a good mother. However, there are two interesting points here: first, these young people have had very little experience of consistent and constructive parenting, rather they appeared to be constructing what they imagined a 'good' parent might be like. Second, consistent with this, they appeared to value qualities that the mentors and their training had not emphasized, such as, giving advice and being directive. In contrast to children from secure backgrounds, these youngsters appeared to place a more positive value on directive involvement which they variously described as; 'nagging', 'being sorted out', 'given advice'. However, terms like 'nagging' were used in a much more benign way as a form of caring or supportive concern rather than a destructive form of 'nagging'. It is possible that because they had experienced very little of this kind of attention, rather than rebelling from it, they saw it as an indication of someone caring, of taking the trouble to think about them. There was something quite personally poignant about this sense of wanting to have adults around them who had the spare emotional capacity to care about them.

The young people also revealed interesting accounts of what helped the initial development of the mentoring relationship. A strong element of this was a sense of the mentoring putting them first and even of 'bending the rules' – a minor collusion together against authority. This appeared to give them a sense that the mentors were different to other authority figures; 'I gave her tests, mum said not to let me smoke, she never told mum I smoked that day'. It also became clear, and this was supported by the mentors themselves and by the mentoring service, that a sort of grapevine was developing whereby the young people were advocating the benefits of mentoring to each other. Interestingly, this seemed to emphasize that the mentor was a different kind of figure. For example, Joan described how she had heard about it, ' 'Cause one of my mates had a mentor, so I wanted one. . . . and she said . . . It's nice having a mentor 'cause if you've got any problems you can go and talk to them' and she went on to say, 'it's not like social workers, you don't have to worry. 'Cause they don't work for social services do they?' This suggests that the professional and statutory duties that social services have to undertake, often involving difficult decisions about the young people's lives, are seen as getting in the way of developing trust and a creative relationship with young people. A fact that, of course, many committed and dedicated social workers regret as having arisen as a consequence of the severe financial and professional constraints that have been placed on them. Furthermore, the young people described that the mentors were able to be generous with their time and attention. This almost appeared to represent a form of 'cognitive dissonance' or puzzlement for the young people along the lines of: I have low self-esteem and think of myself as unlovable not worthy of affection. Yet, the mentor spends a lot of time with me but does not get paid for it. Why? Even when I test them and am difficult they stay with me. Maybe I am not so bad after all? Or are they a bit weird? But actually they are OK and not really weird. Oh, well maybe I am OK, it's alright to like myself a bit? What was important in this process was that this puzzle for the young person stayed in place for long enough for them to start to conclude that the only answer had to be such a positive one about themselves. The accounts from the young people, discussions with the mentors and the staff of the Promise mentoring scheme

suggest that sometimes a sense of trust could develop relatively quickly: in a matter of months not years.

Although the research reveals very little in the way of any negative experiences there were some important indications of issues that the service may need to think about in the future. The first of these was around the issue of dependency. Although some of the young people talked about having matured and become more independent, there was a strong sense that they hoped the relationship could develop and transform into a natural friendship. Generally, they expressed the hope that they would be able to continue contact with their mentors beyond the 2-year period and after they had reached 18 years of age. Many of the mentors had already discussed that they would be willing to maintain a relationship, but the extent of the relationship and how the relationship evolves and changes are important issues. Also, there may be considerable differences in how quickly and in what ways different young people are able to manage the transition from an intense to more casual relationship with their mentor. Such issues of dependency and transitions are being actively considered and developed by the service (Salter, personal communication, 2003).

It did appear in some of the interviews that the young people had areas of unresolved difficulties in their lives, for example, difficulties with one of their parents or traumatic memories that were continuing to trouble them. Many of the youngsters stated clearly that they found it useful to talk about these with their mentors. This more therapeutic role was something that the mentors had not specifically been trained for and there appeared to be differences in how confident they felt about taking on this role. A substantial body of research supports the idea that a central component of successful therapy is the therapeutic relationship. The mentoring relationship was clearly seen by young people as very positive and as contributing to change. For example, Annie described it as:

> I thought it was going to be counselling. It wasn't counselling . . . she (the mentor) pulled me out of the worst situation I was in . . . She stopped me slashing my wrists . . . She put me back on the rails.

The impressions from the interviews suggested both that the mentoring experience achieved considerably more than might be expected, but also raises the question of whether it can, or should be developed to go further in some cases. Specifically, some youngsters expressed areas of unresolved difficulties, which it appeared the mentor had not taken on exploring with them. In the interviews some of the youngsters showed a reluctance to address some issues, for example, relating to family difficulties. Interviews with the mentors revealed differences in how confident they were in addressing difficult issues. Some reported that they did attempt this and felt it had been of considerable benefit to the youngsters. In some other cases the mentors felt anxious or overwhelmed at the prospect of tackling some difficult issues, for example, to do with neglect or abusive relationships in the family.

In addition to seeking to explore the nature of young people's experiences, this study also was an attempt to examine whether an attachment theory lens and ideas from Erikson's psychosocial model were relevant in theorizing the nature of mentoring. It is suggested that the accounts strongly support the relevance of both, and in particular the relevance of attachment theory. It is clear from the case notes and the accounts of these young people that they closely resemble the accounts originally given by Bowlby in his seminal studies. The young people described experiences of fractured attachments, emotional and physical abuse, inconsistent parenting and frequent breakage of any embryonic connections with professionals attempting to provide care for them. This had

left these young people with a legacy of lack of trust of others and lack of self-respect. This was clear in their accounts as was the fact that they experienced their mentors, usually as the first and the most consistently positive and emotionally supportive person in their lives. The genuine affection and care that they experienced led to the young people being able to develop a sense of trust that was a relatively new experience for them. Importantly, this was seen as generalizing to other relationships.

Importantly, the findings are also consistent with modern attachment theory, which emphasizes the development of trust, not just through actions or re-parenting, but also through talk. Generally, the young people had come to distrust the talk and promises of adults but with their mentors had started to learn that what people said and did could be trusted. Importantly, they had also started to be able to form coherent stories about themselves and their experiences. The work of Mary Main (Main et al., 1985) has signalled a move in attachment theory to a view that positive change can occur more rapidly than had previously been thought if young people are able to emotionally process difficult experiences so as to be able to develop a coherent account of their experiences. This does not mean forgetting the negative aspects, but being able to make an account of them. The young people described how the mentors assisted this process by adopting a non-blaming position towards their families and inviting the young people to consider their parents' perspectives and the difficulties they may have faced.

The young people here emphasized that it was the supportive, sympathetic and honest talk with their mentors that was one of the most important aspects of the experience. However, certainly at the start of the relationship with the mentor, it was also clear that there was a need for concrete demonstration – that 'actions spoke louder than words'. For these youngsters they needed to see someone starting to care not just to hear 'empty promises'.

Finally, the study also fits with Erikson's ideas and his emphasis on the importance of mentors. In a sense, his theory also throws light on why the experience is also important for the mentors. He emphasizes that at mid- and later life it is important for us to feel able to pass on the benefits of our experience, a little of the wisdom we have gained, to the younger generations. This helps to give meaning to our own lives and a sense of leaving something behind when we are no longer here. It was clear from the discussion and conversations with the mentors that this was in part true for them. They felt they had benefited and grown as people as a result of the mentoring experience. Interestingly, the young people also seemed to connect with this reciprocal aspect of the relationship in wanting to do things for their mentor and to give care and affection back to them in return. In a sense this summarizes the mentoring experience for both the young people and the mentors: the nurturing of the ability to receive and give care and affection. In addition the study also supports Erikson's ideas that relationships other than family ones can be extremely important and connects with current debates (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) in attachment theory about the primacy, or otherwise of the relationships with parents, especially mothers.

Future studies

This study looked at the experiences of a group of young people who have had a positive experience of mentoring. There are important questions, however, about ways in which the experience does not work so well. For example, why do some young people find it hard to engage? Why do they drop out of the service? There is also scope for more research from the mentors' experience. Related to this, it would be useful to know in more detail about what helps to make the relationship work and how it changes over time. The second author (PCR) is engaged in a piece of longitudinal research which will

381

explore the experience of mentoring over a period and hopes to be able to explore how the relationship changes over time, what some of the critical points and issues are and how mentor and mentee negotiate these. It could also be very interesting to interview pairs of mentors and mentees both alone, and also together and to see, and hear about how their relationship has evolved over time.

Note

We confirm that permission has been obtained from participants and the organization in which the study was based for use of the material (interviews) in the study. In addition, we confirm that the names of the participants have been altered to ensure confidentiality

References

Ainsworth, M.D.S. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist, 44*, 709–716.

Belsky, J., & Cassidy, J. (1994). Attachment and close relationships: individual difference perspective. *Psychological Inquiry, 5*, 27–30.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss, Vol. 2: Separation, anxiety and anger*. London: Hogarth.

Bowlby, J. (1982). Attachment and loss: Retrospect and prospect. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 52*, 664–676.

Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P.R. (Eds.). (1999). *Handbook of attachment theory: Research and clinical application.* New York: Guilford Press.

Carlson, V., Cicchetti, D., Barnett, D., & Braunwald, K. (1989). Finding order in disorganization: Lessons from research on maltreated infants attachment to their care givers. In D. Cicchetti & V. Carlson (Eds.), *Child maltreatment: Theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dallos, R., & Draper, R. (2005). *An introduction to family therapy* (2nd ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Downey, G., & Feldman, S.I. (1996). The implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*, 1327–1343.

Dubois, D.L., & Neville, H.A. (1997). Youth mentoring: Investigation of relationship characteristics and perceived benefits. *Journal of Community Psychology, 25*, 227–234.

Erikson, E.H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle: Selected papers by Erik H. Erikson*, Vol. 18. New York: International Universities Press.

Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity youth and crisis.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Evans, I.M., & Ave, K.T. (2000). Mentoring children and youth: Principles, issues, and policy implications for community programmes in New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 29*, 41–49.

Evans, I.M., Wilson, N.J., Hansson, G., & Hungerford, R. (1997). Positive and negative behaviours of independent, adolescent youth participation in a community support programme. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 26*, 29–35.

Fonagy, P., Steele, M., Steele, H., Moran, G.S., & Higgitt, A.C. (1991). The capacity for understanding mental states: The reflective self in parent and child and its significance for security of attachment. *Infant Journal of Mental Health, 12*, 201–215.

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago: Aldine.

Grossman, J.B., & Rhodes, J.E. (2002). The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring relationships. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 30*, 199–219.

Haensley, P.A., & Parsons, J.L. (1993). Creative, intellectual and psychosocial development through mentorship: Relationships and stages. *Youth & Society, 25*, 202–221.

Llewelyn, S.P. (1988). Psychological therapy as viewed by clients and therapists. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology, 27*, 223–237.

Main, K., Kaplan, N., & Cassidy, J. (1985). Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: A move to the level of representation. In I. Bretherton & E. Water (Eds.), *Monographs of the Society for Research and Child Development,* Serial no. 209.50: Nos 1–2 (pp. 66–106). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Osborne, M., & Smith, J. (1998). The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Health Psychology, 3*, 65–83.

Rhodes, J.E. (2002). *Stand by me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Rhodes, J.E., Haight, W.L., & Briggs, E.C. (1999). The influence of mentoring on the peer relationships of foster youth in relative and nonrelative care. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 9*, 185–201.

Rogers, C. (1955). *Client-centred therapy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Rutter, M. (1995). Clinical implications of attachment concepts: Retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 36*, 549–571.

Sroufe, A.L. (1995). Contribution of attachment theory to developmental psychopathology. In E.A. Carlson & A.L. Sroufe (Eds.), *Developmental psychology, Vol. 1: Theory and methods* (pp. 581–617). New York: Plenum Press.

Styles, M.B., & Morrow, K.V. (1992). *Understanding how youth and elders form relationships: A study of four Linking Lifetimes programs (Research Report).* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.