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## College Student Mentors and Latino Youth: A Qualitative Study of the Mentoring Relationship

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## College Student Mentors and Latino Youth: A Qualitative Study of the Mentoring Relationship

### Abstract

This phenomenological study describes the meaning of mentoring relationships from the perspectives of six purposefully selected mentors involved in the Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP), and investigates underlying themes regarding the mentors' relationships. Clusters of themes pertaining to the mentors' relationship with the mentee, the relationship of the mentor with the mentee's family, and the mentors' personal and professional development contributed to the meaning of the mentoring relationship for LAMP mentors. Mentors highlighted challenges that characterized the mentoring relationships at various points in time: However, relationship strengths outweighed potential obstacles. Findings are useful for programs that target Latino youth, and have implications for the recruitment and retention of mentors. Findings bring to light the need for future research that considers the quality of the mentoring relationship and its influence on outcomes for mentoring participants

### Keywords

Mentoring, Latino Youth, Phenomenology, Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP), and Mentoring Relationships

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## **College Student Mentors and Latino Youth: A Qualitative Study of the Mentoring Relationship<sup>1</sup>**

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*This phenomenological study describes the meaning of mentoring relationships from the perspectives of six purposefully selected mentors involved in the Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP), and investigates underlying themes regarding the mentors' relationships. Clusters of themes pertaining to the mentors' relationship with the mentee, the relationship of the mentor with the mentee's family, and the mentors' personal and professional development contributed to the meaning of the mentoring relationship for LAMP mentors. Mentors highlighted challenges that characterized the mentoring relationships at various points in time: However, relationship strengths outweighed potential obstacles. Findings are useful for programs that target Latino youth, and have implications for the recruitment and retention of mentors. Findings bring to light the need for future research that considers the quality of the mentoring relationship and its influence on outcomes for mentoring participants. Key Words: Youth Mentoring, Latino Youth, Phenomenology, Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP), and Mentoring Relationships*

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Mentoring programs focusing on areas ranging from academic achievement to social skills development have become increasingly popular with community service agencies in recent years. Some mentoring programs focus on youth development or prevention of risk behaviors whereas others target career shadowing or personal development activities. Mentoring programs can operate independently or function in collaboration with other service efforts, can involve mentors of different ages, and may be based in the community or at specific on-school sites. Current literature on youth mentoring programs focuses primarily on programmatic specifics and mentee outcomes rather than the specific experiences of individual mentors (Freedman, 1992; National Mentoring Working Group, 1991; Rhodes, 1994).

Outcome research has considered the potential impact on mentees involved in mentoring programs, but there is limited research that investigates the perspectives of mentors. Some (DuBois & Neville, 1997) have examined the characteristics of mentor-

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mentee relationships in community-based youth mentoring programs and considered perceived mentee benefits, but not the specific experiences of mentors involved in the programs. Others (de Anda, 2001) have examined mentors' perspectives, though in limited capacity. The examinations have been very brief and have been tied specifically to the mentor (e.g., benefits of mentoring, the impact mentors believe they have on mentees) and less to the mentoring relationship.

Program operation specifics are helpful and necessary for program duplication, but understanding the experiences of mentors and others involved in the mentoring process is of additional value. While the mentoring relationship has been examined in organizational mentoring programs, it has been less often considered in youth mentoring programs (Kram, 1983, 1986). Initial findings from a meta-analysis of mentoring program evaluations identified features of the mentoring relationship, such as emotional closeness and frequency of contact, as important contributors to mentee success (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). According to DuBois et al. characteristics of the mentoring relationship have been understudied; thus, studies are needed that address these important characteristics. Hence, the meaning of the youth mentoring relationship from the mentors' perspectives was the focus of our study.

This paper attempts to uncover the meaning of a mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentor, and seeks to investigate the underlying themes that help describe this phenomenon. Phenomenology, a specific qualitative approach, is an appropriate tradition from which mentors' perspectives on their mentoring relationships can be examined. According to Creswell (1998), phenomenology allows participants' voices to elucidate the meaningfulness of experienced events. Becker (1992) describes the goal of phenomenological research to generate a general understanding and description of a given phenomenon. Phenomenological psychological research includes the real world situations of individuals, and attempts to gain an understanding and description of how specific experiences are lived by participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003a). The approach is contextually-dependent: The findings of the study are grounded in the lived experiences of participants. Phenomenology relates to what is directly experienced before an individual starts to contextualize and interpret their feelings and responses in light of past events (Crotty, 1998). Phenomenology is not critical instead it is grounded in subjectivity based on lived experience. In this study, we sought to obtain a rich, detailed description of the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentors. The aim was not to predict, but to provide broad information about the phenomenon of interest.

This study is unique because it focuses on a group of college student mentors involved in a mentoring program for Latino youth and families, the Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP). LAMP is a culture-specific program that was developed, and continues to be implemented, by a group of faculty and students from a Midwestern university, and staff from a community center that serves the local Latino population. The aim of LAMP is to match Latino college students (or students identified to be culturally-sensitive) with disadvantaged Latino youth from the community (see Zamboanga, Roy, Knoche, & Snyder, 2001 for additional program information).

College students apply to serve as youth mentors in the program and school personnel identify community youth that could benefit from additional scholastic and social support. Students are eligible to receive university field work credits for their

participation in the program. Mentor-mentee matches are based on a variety of factors including personality characteristics, shared interests, and other demographic variables consistent with recommended mentoring program practices (National Mentoring Working Group, 1991; Rhodes, 1994). Mentor-mentee pairs meet for two hours per week for at least one academic year, and engage in a variety of educational and social activities. Mentors are also involved in weekly trainings and debriefing sessions to support their work with mentees (academic, interpersonal, and social resources). The debriefing sessions involve an update of activities and issues that occur during the previous week. Sometimes the debriefs are celebratory and other times they are a time for problem solving. In addition to supporting academic success among youth participants, the program hopes to facilitate the development of leadership skills in college student mentors.

Our study is a supplementary investigation to the ongoing systematic program evaluation of LAMP. Through their own words, mentors described their relationship with youth as well as their own feelings about being a mentor. Listening to the voices of individual participants can help us further understand research that has been conducted on youth mentoring programs. The meaning of the mentoring relationship will contextualize previous findings on successful or unsuccessful mentoring outcomes. Gaining a more complete understanding of the meaning of the relationship might elucidate the mentors' personal and professional experiences in the program that contribute to mentee well-being.

LAMP focuses on mentor development in addition to youth academic success and thereby provides an appropriate framework to examine the mentors' perspectives of the mentoring relationship. In addition, LAMP has a unique focus on family involvement which sets it apart from other youth mentoring programs. LAMP involves family members in the mentoring program from the onset. Families that are involved in the mentoring process are invited to attend family events and can participate in a parent group. Mentors are expected to make connections and support the entire family on behalf of their mentees.

The information gathered from mentors in this study is specifically useful for understanding LAMP, but findings will also be beneficial to community agency staff from various locations, interested in developing similar programs as well as those currently involved in mentor recruitment and retention. Understanding the meaning of the experience for mentors can help shape future programmatic efforts (see Zamboanga & Knoche, 2003 for specific programmatic implications and activity suggestions based on the findings in this paper).

## **Method**

As a means of contextualizing the researchers, both authors initially attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and were mutually involved with the Latino Research Initiative. Byron Zamboanga had an integral role in the development of LAMP, while Lisa Knoche was involved for a long period of time with the evaluation of the Project. Lisa was responsible for data collection, and both Lisa and Byron participated in the data analysis. We jointly worked through the interpretation of the data.

## **Participants**

Participants included six LAMP mentors who had been involved with the program for 18 to 24 months, and had been matched with the same mentee during this period of time. The mentors were purposefully selected, as they were the only six out of approximately twenty mentors that had been matched with the same mentee over the duration of 18 – 24 months. Michael was a Mexican American male who spoke English only; Cooper was a Puerto Rican male who spoke English only. The remaining four mentors interviewed were female: Leslie identified as Latina and could speak some Spanish, Lisa and Nikki were White who spoke both Spanish and English, and Rosalind was a Mexican American who spoke some Spanish. Mentors' ages ranged from 22 to 23 years, at the time of the interviews, and were students at a Midwestern university. Their respective mentees ranged in age from 12 to 16 years. All participants selected had been in a mentoring relationship for approximately the same amount of time. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants provided informed consent to participate in the program evaluation of LAMP.

## **Interviews**

Mentors participated in semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews with the evaluation coordinator (one of the study authors) on the university campus. Trustworthiness, critical for obtaining valid information from participants, is an important element of qualitative research. In this study, rapport had previously been established through the ongoing contact on the part of the evaluation coordinator. A mutual respect between the mentors, mentees, and evaluation coordinator had developed over the course of the program. Thus, when mentors were approached to participate in the in-depth interviews they were comfortable and willing to provide information and perspectives. An interview guide consisting of a series of eighteen open-ended questions was used, which was designed to help the mentors describe the meaning of their relationship with their mentees (See Appendix A for question list). Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. The interview followed the flow dictated by the mentor, though each mentor answered all of the questions on the protocol. This flexibility in the interview format was effective at reducing any anxiety the mentors might have experienced. To ensure accurate transcription of the data, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed with the permission of each participant. Participants each received \$5.00 for completing the research interview.

## **Data Analysis**

Phenomenology was used to explore and describe the meaning of mentoring relationships among participants. This philosophy began in the early 1900's by Edmund Husserl, and because the "study of the conscious mind" was a natural fit with psychology, the two disciplines came to meet (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003a). Phenomenology is focused on illuminating the essential aspects of a given phenomenon, in this case the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentor. The approach attempts to clarify and describe life experiences of individuals that occur in everyday life; the

experiences are common to a group of people. With this approach, we (the authors) first “bracketed” the phenomenon of interest and discussed our preconceived ideas and notions about the mentoring experience. This is important because preconceived ideas about the mentoring relationship can cloud the reality experienced by the research participants (Crotty, 1998; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003a, 2003b). It was necessary for the authors to have an “epoché” or attitudinal shift whereby we did not engage in our thoughts about the meaning of the mentoring relationship, while exploring the meanings provided by mentors in the study. We first read the set of transcribed interviews as a whole. We then carefully reviewed the interviews and focused our attention on specific statements related to the phenomenon of interest. This is a process known as *horizontalization* whereby each statement is considered equal in understanding the mentoring relationship. Each time the mentor indicated a new idea on the meaning of the relationship a note was made. This is referred to as “establishing meaning units” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003b, p. 252).

After recording these statements, we converted them into themes and subsequently grouped similar themes into clusters of meaning, according to the practices recommended by Becker (1992). This is similar to the process outlined by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003b). We analyzed across individual interviews to look for the most comprehensive set of ideas (based on mentors’ statements) that depicted their views on the mentoring relationship. Transcripts were coded according to this initial set of 22 meaning units by three independent coders, including two graduate students familiar with the qualitative approach and one upper-level undergraduate student who received specific training in coding for this study. Coders were within 80% agreement on the initial coding scheme. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. In the event that there were disagreements on the coding of mentors’ statements, the coders discussed the statement and mutually decided on the appropriate meaning unit through discussion (Creswell, 1998). The rich discussion around somewhat ambiguous statements was an important part of the interpretative process and helped prevent a single perspective from shaping the entire analysis of the data, and assisted in the search for all possible meanings, a critical component to phenomenology.

Careful analysis of the data yielded nine primary themes that were subsequently categorized into three clusters that best depicted the meaningfulness of the mentoring relationship for participants. This process, according to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003b), is considered to be the transformation of meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions.

The unit of analysis was at the phrase level. That is, we did not code each particular word but the phrase provided by the participants. This was important to accurately capture the essence conveyed by the mentors. Themes, or psychologically sensitive expressions, were based on frequency of response across mentoring participants. Theme labels were derived from an interpretation and synthesis of mentors’ statements. Further analysis of the themes resulted in the cluster labels (e.g., Relationship with mentee, Relationship with mentee’s Family, Mentor personal and professional development). The final data analytic step, similar to the final step in the analysis according to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003b), was to elucidate the essence of the experience through the themes subsumed within each cluster. This exhaustive description provided a broad understanding of the total phenomenon as described by the participants.

Creswell (1998) outlines guidelines to ensure the validity of a phenomenological investigation, including the trustworthiness of the study. In this study, the interviewer did not influence the mentors' responses to questions. Mentors were free to provide any answers. Another step in ensuring the trustworthiness of our findings was that the transcription of data was checked for accuracy. We believed we were able to incorporate all data to reflect the possible points of view in our final interpretation of the data; perhaps there exists a possibility that another researcher, from another area of study, would find other meanings. Based on our experiences and backgrounds, we felt that all possibilities were addressed in our conclusions. The description offered in the final analysis goes beyond one particular dyad, to transcend the particular situation and apply it to each mentor interviewed for this study. Finally, many examples of mentor responses are provided that validate the themes provided.

Additionally, findings were validated through triangulation with other evaluation data including weekly experience logs of mentoring activities, a peer review of an early draft of this manuscript by two faculty familiar with qualitative work and LAMP, and through a member check by one of the mentors interviewed. A single mentor was utilized because at the time of manuscript preparation he was the only student available and enrolled at the university. Weekly experience logs indicated the activities in which each pair engaged in as well as the time spent together, including time spent with family. Although there are other approaches available and widely used, we selected phenomenology because it allowed us freedom to accurately convey the meaning of the mentoring relationship, utilizing the real life experiences of mentors in LAMP. Phenomenology is grounded in the idea of consciousness; that is, what participants are aware of experiencing. Our participants were uniquely aware of their own mentoring experiences. On a superficial level, they might not have verbalized an understanding of the full meaning of their experiences. The phenomenological approach is limited to what the participants recognize as experiences. Phenomenology allowed us to study their unique perspectives in a holistic sense.

## **Results and Discussion**

The key themes that emerged from mentors' statements were grouped into three primary clusters that captured the meaning of the mentoring relationship (see Table 1). The clusters fell into three categories: (1) the characterization of the mentoring relationship between the mentor and mentee, (2) the meaning of the mentors' relationship with the mentee's family, and (3) the mentor's personal and professional development through involvement in the mentoring relationship. Each of these broad categories can be further examined by considering specific examples offered by the mentors interviewed.



Table 1

*Clusters of Themes Derived from Mentor Statements Concerning the Meaning of the Mentoring Relationship*

<p>Cluster 1: Relationship with Mentee</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapport building</li> <li>• Strengths</li> <li>• Perspective-taking</li> </ul> <p>Cluster 2: Relationship with Mentee's Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentor-mentee family challenges</li> <li>• Mentor-mentee family strengths</li> </ul> <p>Cluster 3: Mentor Personal and Professional Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skill and interest development</li> <li>• Relationship with other mentors</li> <li>• Reinforcing cultural ties and understanding</li> <li>• Personal satisfaction</li> </ul>
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**Cluster 1: Relationship with Mentee**

All of the mentors interviewed discussed elements of the mentor-mentee relationship that were helpful in describing and understanding the mentoring relationship. Rapport building and strengths such as empathy and perspective-taking were significant contributors to the mentors' understandings of the mentor-mentee relationship.

*Theme: Rapport building*

To facilitate mentor-mentee development of an effective and trusting relationship, each pair underwent the process of rapport building. The process appeared to be unique to each mentor-mentee pair. Some mentors reported challenges related to scheduling that subsequently affected rapport building. For example, Rosalind reported,

At first it was kind of hard because I didn't know how to work with her..., so I did have some times that were frustrating. We'd set a time and it just didn't work, and so it made me feel bad 'cause we didn't get to meet.

Other mentors expressed difficulties establishing conversations with their mentees, and some mentors suggested that age and personality differences might have contributed to these challenges. For example, Nikki indicated

[My mentee] does not talk very much, and it's like pulling teeth, 'cause I'll ask her questions and everything is yes or no, and even if I ask her non-yes or no questions, she still doesn't respond very much. She doesn't show her emotions very much, she does not get very excited about things so it's hard for me to gauge, especially at first, whether she's having a good time or not, whether she even likes doing the things we did.

Similarly, Cooper highlighted

[My mentee] really didn't talk all that much at first, it's like pulling teeth because it took awhile, he's really shy and doesn't express himself very much so like the first month or so it's just me talking, getting one word answers all the time... Basically, I just have to pry and dig until he finally starts telling me more and finally he opened up.

Mentors utilized activity-based strategies to build rapport with their mentees. Mentors often reported using preferred activities as a safe point from which they could extend conversations into more meaningful areas. Cooper illustrated this.

A lot of times I incorporate something like fun... We'll go to [a recreation center] that way it's a laid back environment and if he feels like I'm pushing too much, we just get back into the game and not worry about it anymore.

Nikki reported using a similar strategy.

I tried to base our activities on something, so it wasn't just us talking but it was maybe us talking about something specific that we were doing. We would go to museums or to a photography exhibit and then we would talk. Her looking at the art and being interested in it, asking questions, gave me a sense into her personality and what kind of person she is and that maybe she does like doing things with me.

In essence, mentors were able to converse with their mentees using indirect strategies, and in the process they were able to build rapport and establish a foundation for their mentoring relationship.

Mentors also reflected on the specific communication strategies they used to build rapport with their mentees. For example, Nikki highlighted the need for clarity in communication.

I always try to be very careful when I communicate with her, be very clear with her what my intentions are and what I'm planning, and just make sure she's very aware of where our relationship is. I also am very careful to make sure that she knows that I can be there for her, and that I am her friend, and if for some reason I have to cancel, I make it very clear that it's

not because I don't want to be with her but it's because I have other things to do. I'm just very conscientious around her of what I say.

Others reflected on conversation strategies and approaches. Mentors had to be aware of the communication strategies that worked best with each mentee based on age level and personality. For example, Leslie reported, "If I just talk like I'm this older, wiser person, then I don't get as good a response as if I talk to her as if I'm one of her friends... Maybe get more down on her level..."

The strategies the mentors utilized to build rapport changed as their interactions progressed. As the pairs grew increasingly comfortable with each other, the focus of the relationship also shifted. Michael indicated,

I felt that we focused on different things in the relationship; like at first we had to focus on getting to know each other and then we kind of focused on what each other liked ... and now we are continuing more on what each other likes.

In most cases, mentors were capable of discerning particular "turning points" in the relationship that were indicative of having established a level of comfort and rapport with their mentees. This entailed a specific act of sharing by a mentee or the emergence of a new level of open conversation. For example, Cooper reported,

The first set of grades he got he wasn't going to say anything to me about it, but then the next set he brought them to me because I dropped him off at his house and he told me to wait and ... then he came back out and handed the paper to me and I was like "OK, this is working."

When Cooper's mentee shared his report card, Cooper felt the meaning of the mentoring relationship had evolved. Similarly, Lisa stated,

...When I talk to her on the phone she doesn't seem weird, she seems excited. When I go to pick her up at school and [conversation] is easier. She'll just immediately start talking, telling me about her days without me being like, "Did you have a good day?"

In short, the statements of the mentors reflect the dynamic and evolving process of rapport building in the mentoring relationship. Mentors experienced challenges in building comfortable relationships early on. They reported utilizing a variety of strategies to establish rapport with their mentees, and ultimately were able to develop relaxed, satisfying mentoring partnerships.

### *Theme: Strengths*

Just as in any relationship, the mentor-mentee relationship was characterized by multiple strengths. The mentoring relationship evolved and took on different characteristics after rapport was established. Conceivably, the rapport building process

was instrumental in aiding the interpersonal bond between mentors and their mentees. Mentors reported characteristics of the relationship that reflected strong bonds with their mentees. Specifically, mentors described the strength of the relationships with their mentees as being open (i.e., they exchanged information with one another). Mentors found this open form of communication to be valuable and helpful in enhancing the relationship. For example, Michael indicated,

I don't really consider [mentee] so much as my mentee any more, I consider him more as my friend...I'm an older friend where he can still come to me for guidance and advice and questions on whatever. He's open and comfortable enough to ask me pretty much everything and I think that's how friends are.

The openness in the mentoring relationship had some limitations, according to Cooper.

He's almost like a little brother to me because there is a lot of stuff that he can say and we can relate to...but at the same time there is also kind of like the business aspect where if he says certain things that I think are going to get him hurt or in trouble, I still have to bring it to someone's attention.

As mentees began to open up to their mentors, the mentors reported feeling more successful at reaching youths and making a difference in their lives. The openness of mentees often signaled an important transition point in the mentoring relationship. Rosalind stated,

I would say the whole turning point was when she opened up to me about her relationship with her boyfriend, 'cause we had never really sat down and talked about that. She felt very open, she could trust me and she could be open with me ... The trust is there, so it just makes me feel ten times better that she's becoming open.

The strengths of the mentoring relationship, according to the mentors, were not limited to the open relationship quality. Responsibility and dependability also characterized strengths in the mentor-mentee relationships. Specifically, mentors reported feeling responsible for their younger mentees and felt that their mentees could count on them. For example, Michael indicated, "I still have a sense of being responsible around him... I'm still looked at as like a parental [sic], as like a guardian." Likewise, Lisa reported, "She's 12 and I'm 22. So I definitely feel like I have to take the responsibility and adult role." Nikki said, "I think that she depends on me and she thinks I'm reliable." In essence, the responsibility the mentors felt toward their mentees contributed to the meaning of the relationship, regardless of whether they felt more like a sibling, friend, or parent. Mentors' sense of responsibility and dependability affected the approach they used with their mentee and the quality of interaction that ensued.

*Theme: Perspective-taking*

The shared experiences and perspectives of particular mentor-mentee pairs contributed to the meaning of the mentoring relationship. In some cases, mentors were able to *empathize* with their mentee because of similar life circumstances. In other situations, mentors might not have experienced similar life events, but still made an effort to relate and *understand* the position of their mentees. The perspective-taking ability of the mentor helped shape the type of relationship that emerged between mentor and mentee.

Empathy for the mentee resulted from a variety of shared experiences. In the case of Rosalind it was a product of similar cultural backgrounds and family values.

She doesn't want to stand up to her parents, though at times I really wish she would, but they're very family oriented. I understand it. I know that, I know how she feels because I never want to disrespect my parents, ever...I know where some things are coming from because I was raised that way too.

In other cases the empathy resulted from shared academic experiences. Cooper reported,

But I think he gets the benefit because I'm not just a person that's like, "Oh, it's hard for me too." The fact that I went through the exact same things on certain levels and I can at least say, "That's what I had to do to get out of this."

Mentees may benefit as a result of experiences they share with their mentors. The mentee may be more inclined to take advice from a mentor who has been in a similar situation. For example, Cooper said,

We've talked about when I had this happen, "These are the things that I had to do and these are things that I had to consider," and he will say, "Well you know, those things like A and B don't really apply to me, but C still does," so I think he does value it...

The mentor's ability to understand the life of their mentee was significant from the perspective of the mentor. Mutual understanding through perspective-taking was an important element of the mentoring relationship.

*Mentor-Mentee cluster summary*

The mentor-mentee relationship characterized the first cluster of themes identified across mentors. Previous research on the mentor-mentee relationship supports our findings (Rhodes, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1992). Each mentor experienced relationship-building with his or her mentee in a unique way, but all participants mentioned the significance of this process for the meaning of the mentoring relationship. The challenges in rapport building and establishing connections with mentees were a universally

described phenomenon. After mentors established rapport with their mentees, strengths in the relationship unfolded. Furthermore, mentors' abilities to understand and empathize with their mentees' circumstances, through shared perspectives, contributed in significant ways to the development and growth of the mentor-mentee relationships.

## **Cluster 2: Relationship with Mentee's Family**

Mentors described the mentor-mentee family relationship as an important element in the overall mentoring experience. The mentor-mentee family relationship was an important component of the mentoring relationship for the mentors interviewed. The mentor-mentee family relationship included both challenges and strengths.

### *Theme: Mentor-mentee family challenges*

Initially, mentors discussed challenges in getting to know their mentees' families and developing rapport with them. Language posed one of the first challenges for mentors. Since many of the mentees' families spoke primarily Spanish, all of the mentors interviewed, with the exception of Nikki and Lisa who were fluent, had limited Spanish proficiency.

Non-Spanish speaking mentors indicated that rapport building with the family was affected because they could not speak with the families directly. Building rapport is a challenging process in itself, and the added component of language differences increased the difficulty of establishing a trusting relationship. In some cases, it impeded the process of mentor-family interaction. For example, Leslie reported, "I wish I really knew her family better. Her parents don't speak English, or at least they don't really speak to me. But I just wish I had more interaction with the family." Rosalind had a similar reflection and indicated, "Now her father, I really haven't gotten to know real well. First of all he can't understand me, I know that there's always the language barrier..."

The issue of language also contributed to Spanish-speaking mentors' discomfort in speaking with their mentee's family. Lisa reported,

I'm never sure if I should speak in Spanish or English. I think I'm at the level that I could just speak to them in Spanish, I mean some words I probably wouldn't be able to get, but I think I could get around the idea. I wonder if I'm kind of insulting her because I know she speaks a little bit of English, and so I never really know which I should do.

The mentor-family relationship appeared to be affected in part by language challenges. In some cases, families had a difficult time getting to know their children's mentors. In addition to relationship development, language differences posed a practical communication barrier. For example, if a mentor needed to speak with a parent about the mentee using the child as a translator was not very effective. Cooper reflected on this, and said,

Mother is usually there at 4 p.m., when we are getting there and taking off to do something and so I talk to her, it's just her English isn't good and my Spanish is poor, so right there we have an absolute language barrier. And I could use [my mentee] but I need to talk to them about [my mentee]. It doesn't work...

In response, mentors developed strategies to communicate more effectively with families where language differences exist. By allowing mentees to translate information about meeting times and available resources, mentors had limited opportunity to exchange specific information about the mentee. Mentors reported modest progress in their ability to speak Spanish. Parents and mentors were each able to offer some Spanish and English to communicate meaning.

Another challenge to building family relations was the limited availability of parents resulting from work outside the home. For example, Rosalind reported,

I'm getting to know [the family] more but it's taken about the whole semester to get to know them ... when I'm over there either I'll hit with the dad or I'll hit with the mom; one or the other, but never both of them together.

Building relationships with the family was difficult for some mentors because of parental time constraints. Although mentors expressed difficulty finding time to interact with both mothers and fathers, the majority of the mentors reported that more challenges occurred as a result of the father's work schedule. For example, Cooper stated,

I don't get to talk to his parents very much at all. His father works odd hours with construction, sometimes he's out of town, sometimes he's sleeping when we get there. So honestly, I don't think I've talked to him more than four or five times.

Despite the limited contact, Cooper reported a strong relationship with his mentee. Overall, the difficulties encountered by mentors surrounding family relationships did not seem to dramatically compromise the relationship they were able to establish with their mentees.

*Theme: Mentor-mentee family strengths*

Despite some of the challenges that mentors experienced in forming relationships with their mentees' families, the majority of this group of mentors reported close relationships. The strength of the mentor-family relationship was characterized by the level of trust expressed by the family towards the mentor. In their reports, mentors discussed both *explicit* expressions of trust as well as *implicit* expressions, less overt constructions. Some families gave mentors verbal reinforcement about their approval of the mentor-mentee relationship and the mentor's role in their child's life. For example, Lisa said,

And so he [the father] was just sitting in the chair and at first he felt a little uncomfortable, but after that he just started talking, and we talked for an hour and he's like, "Oh you guys [mentor and faculty liaison] are both welcome. Our house is your house. Anytime you want to come back, you come back." That was a major breakthrough with the dad.

Following this conversation with her mentee's father, Lisa felt trusted and welcomed by the family, and felt that her relationship with her mentee was successful.

Other families relied on less direct and more subtle strategies to convey their trust to their child's mentor. Although not overt, each respective mentor and family arrived at a shared meaning of trust as described from the mentor's perspective. Lisa said,

I've never had an extended talk with her mom...she's got my cell phone number so she can get a hold of me when we're together. And I think she feels comfortable with me; I feel comfortable talking to her, she's really nice. Our relationship... is more of an information exchange.

Lisa's comments illustrate the intuitive understanding of her role in the mentee's life. While Lisa had limited conversations with her mentee's mother, she felt comfortable and felt she could communicate with her mentee's mother effectively. In effect, this mentor-parent pair reached an unspoken understanding of their respective roles.

In situations where mentors had minimal contact with the mentee's family, trust was expressed in various forms. By allowing their child to participate in activities with the mentors, parents seemed to indirectly convey a certain level of trust or comfort with the situation. Mentors identified this relationship dynamic and relied on it when interacting with their mentees. For example, Leslie said,

I think that they were pretty comfortable 'cause they didn't seem to have any problem. I'd always tell [my mentee], "Your parents know where you are at?"... On days that we'd make cake or cookies, she takes stuff home then I'd ask her the next time, "Well, what'd they say?" and she'd be like "Oh, they liked it." So at least I knew that they knew that she was with me and this was what we did.

Even though she rarely communicated with her mentee's family directly, Leslie recognized that her mentee's parents were fully aware of their child's activities. Cooper also reported an implicit sense of trust that he developed with his mentee's family.

...That is something that I'm always trying to work on. At least letting them know I'm there, what we're doing, I think I have built up the relationship with them. They can trust it. They let their boys go out with us, and they know we will bring them back in one piece and not let anything happen...



Trust did not develop between the mentor and family without mutual efforts. While parents may not have been directly involved in the mentoring activities, they were aware of their child's activities. In essence, the mentee's family participated indirectly in the mentoring process.

Another characteristic of a strong mentor-family relationship involved the mentor serving as a resource to their mentee's family. Mentors provided information regularly to their younger mentees, however in some situations mentors were also able to provide information to other family members (e.g., parents, siblings, cousins). Michael indicated,

I think [the family] realized after the relationship that [my mentee] and I had, if they even had something, they could come talk to me about it. It wouldn't be as comfortable as [for the mentee], but if something was going on, they saw me as like an older friend or maybe like an uncle-figure type person.

The program was designed to enable mentors to serve as resources for the mentees' families, allowing family members access to information about the community, academic life, or any other relevant issues.

Finally, some mentors experienced a strong sense of attachment toward their mentees' families. Not all, but some mentors reported building strong relationships and spent time with their mentees' families, which they came to enjoy. For example, Cooper said,

I am excited to see him [mentee] and it's tough leaving the place because not only do you have him [mentee], you have his three brothers. All the boys are in the room and you're dealing with them, so it's hard to get up and leave that environment. Some days even when I'm stressed and I have to be somewhere, I always find myself stretching an extra 15 minutes because it's really nice to be with all of them and I don't want to leave. I'm finding myself more and more even on times that I really can't be there any longer, that I'm there for 2 to 3 hours just because once you're there, you don't want to leave.

Cooper's reflection illustrates the strong ties he had with his mentee's family. His relationship developed beyond communication for the purposes of information exchange into something more meaningful and inclusive of other family members.

#### *Mentor-mentee family cluster summary*

In addition to the mentor-mentee interaction, the mentor-mentee family relationship contributed considerably to the meaning of the mentoring relationship process. Mentors discussed challenges and strengths to building ties with mentees' families. Many families displayed their trust through both *explicit* and *implicit* strategies. The type of trust displayed contributed to the meaning of the relationship for the mentor. Our findings suggest that language barriers did not preclude the mentor-mentee family rapport building process from advancing. Latino culture is family-oriented and based on mentors' responses we found that most mentees had relatively strong relationships with

their families. This is somewhat in contrast to past literature on the involvement of family in mentoring relationships that has highlighted some of the potential obstacles (e.g., feelings of betrayal on the part of the mentee) to family involvement. The involvement of the family as an integral element of the mentoring relationship is a unique aspect of LAMP (Rhodes, 2002).

### **Cluster 3: Mentor Personal and Professional Development**

For mentors, the meaning of the mentoring relationship included various aspects related to their own personal development. One of the objectives of the mentoring program was to provide mentors an opportunity to develop leadership skills. In addition to these key areas, mentors reported self-development in a variety of different life areas. Five major themes emerged in the area of mentor development.

#### *Theme: Skill and interest development*

Mentors reported that the mentoring relationship afforded them an opportunity to develop professional interests and interpersonal skills. For some of the mentors, the mentoring experience helped shape future professional interests towards working with youth. For example, after participating in the program for two years, Leslie said, "I've realized that I would like to continue to be a mentor through other programs as I get older in life and continue to learn to work with young people."

The mentoring experience allowed mentors to develop their interpersonal skills, including a better understanding of people, which was appreciated and recognized by the mentors. For instance, Nikki said, "... I want to work for a national company and if anything this gives me an understanding of people, and I think that's good." Many of the mentors said their communication skills were positively affected by being involved in the mentoring program and interacting with a younger mentee. For example, Michael said,

I have learned how much you can learn from other people and even from the beginning it's helped me initiate conversations...I think that having a mentee or being a mentor just really opens your eyes and makes you realize ... how fortunate some people are and it really helps you. It gives you a sense of satisfaction. It really enables you to be more personable and [to] be a better communicator....

Most mentors reported acquiring valuable skills from the experience that will be useful in their lives after college. For example, mentors' awareness for the utility of the Spanish language increased as a result of their mentoring relationship. Being able to understand and communicate with other individuals is a characteristic that will be useful for mentors in future personal and professional contexts.

#### *Theme: Relationship with other mentors*

Many mentors reported that the mentoring program offered them a chance to develop relationships with other mentors in the program. The constructive nature of the

relationships that developed was helpful to mentors in both personal and practical ways. Based on shared experiences, other mentors were able to provide support and feedback. For example, Nikki said,

I like the LAMP program because you get to know the other [LAMP] mentors and form friendships and that makes you want to go to the meetings and also gives you a degree of accountability...I also like the more social type things we do with the other mentors just to build friendships with them.

Relationships with other mentors provided an element of social support that the mentors found helpful. Mentors could rely on the experiences of one another. Others might have encountered similar situations with their mentees and were able to troubleshoot through challenging mentoring situations effectively. Leslie, for instance, reported,

... [It's] good to know the problems that other mentors are facing, that way I'm like, "Okay, I'm not the only one having problems," and also to problem solve. Problems do come up and you get other people's feedback, or you can help other people.

In short, the feedback and support provided by their peers in the mentoring program was an important aspect of the mentoring experience for many of the mentors interviewed.

*Theme: Reinforcing cultural ties and understanding*

LAMP aims to match culturally sensitive college-students with disadvantaged community youth. In many cases, mentoring matches were based on shared cultural history and identity. This characterized four of the six mentors interviewed. The opportunity to reinforce cultural ties was an important element to the mentoring relationship for many of the mentors. Some mentors used the program as a way to develop a better understanding of their own cultural heritage, while others worked to develop a basic understanding of culture. Leslie said,

I'm half Latina and I thought it'd be really interesting to work with someone of my own culture, so I went in to learn more about my culture. I haven't really been an active member doing much in my culture, and so I thought that was really cool.

Leslie found the mentoring relationship to be a way to further explore her own cultural background. Similarly, Rosalind appreciated the opportunity to work with someone who shared her cultural history and said,

I think what is neat about this is the fact that I am working with someone of my own race. For me growing up I didn't have hardly any Mexican friends because I was in a White community... I was the only one, other

than my family... I feel like I'm just glad that I'm here for her... It feels good to give back to someone of your own race, too....

In summary, mentors had the opportunity to gain information about their cultural heritage as well as offer assistance and support to someone similar to their own ethnic background. This experience contributed to their awareness of the meaning of the mentoring relationship.

*Theme: Personal satisfaction*

With regard to personal gain, most mentors reported a sense of satisfaction resulting from their involvement in the mentoring program. The "feel good" factor was a meaningful element to the mentoring experience. For example, Nikki said,

I would definitely say I feel better about myself...it makes me feel better to know that I am doing good, that someone is depending on me, and when I get done seeing her, it just puts me in a good mood. After I'm around her it's a lot easier for me to talk with my friends...I guess it also gives me more self-esteem to know that someone thinks highly of me and respects me.

As reflected above, mentors reported feeling better about themselves and their interpersonal relationships with others. Other mentors talked about the specific impact of their mentees on their own lives (e.g., the satisfaction resulting from the mentoring relationship). For instance, Michael said,

With his presence around it makes me happy because it makes me feel that we're doing something right. And it's not because we're doing something because we have to, but because we're doing something because we want to be together and I think that just brings a sense of satisfaction...I just really enjoy doing this.

Many of the mentoring relationships between college-student mentors and community youth resulted in personal enjoyment and satisfaction. In general, mentors felt they were selflessly giving something back to the community, and consequently felt positive about the experience.

*Mentor development cluster summary*

Mentors identified personal development as an important dimension of the mentoring relationship. Specifically, mentors reported developing or acquiring skills in personal and professional domains. Reinforcing cultural ties and understanding was particularly important for the mentors of Latino backgrounds. The shared ethnic experience of mentor and mentee was a co-constructed component of the mentoring relationship. Mentors reported feeling personally satisfied to be involved in a program that reaches out and helps individuals less fortunate than themselves. This finding is well-

supported in previous research (Parra, DuBois, Nevill, & Povinelli, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1992). The sense of personal satisfaction contributed in meaningful ways to the mentoring experience, as did the peer network. The support the mentors felt from their peer group helped to define the relationship established with the younger mentees.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

This phenomenological investigation revealed the meaning of a mentoring relationship from the perspective of six purposefully selected college student mentors involved in LAMP. The description mentors provided was enriched as a result of their lived experiences within the program. The essence of the mentoring experience was unique for each of the mentors involved in this program, but the cluster of themes that were identified went beyond individuals and characterized each of the relationships. Statements offered by mentors highlighted the challenges that characterized the relationships they developed at various points in time. However, in general, the strengths outweighed potential obstacles to the mentor-mentee relationship. The meaning of the mentoring experience for mentors included personal relationships between mentor-mentee, mentee family relationships as well as opportunities for personal growth and development. Each element contributed uniquely to the mentor's overall understanding and awareness of his/her experience in the mentoring program, and explicit examples of what mentors experience during their involvement in a youth mentoring program.

While qualitative work is not usually generalizable beyond the sample considered the overall experiences of the mentors will prove useful for mentoring program staff as they design interventions. The realities of the mentoring relationship for this particular group of mentors perhaps relate to the cultural association with their mentees. All mentees were Latino. Therefore, the information uncovered in this study will be useful for programs that target Latino youth. For example, other programs might choose to incorporate the family, given the information about the role of family in the mentor-mentee relationship. Specifically, programs might plan family events or outings, or encourage mentors to visit family homes. The findings have implications for those who are involved in mentor recruitment and retention, and will be helpful in designing mentor training. For example, programs might be thoughtful in considering language differences in families and to have bilingual staff and mentors as well as encourage mentors to spend sufficient time building rapport with families (Zamboanga & Knoche, 2003).

Mentors can be alerted in advance to some of the potential obstacles (i.e., language barriers, scheduling conflicts) commonly encountered, and thereby reduce challenges to building relationships with youth and families. Informing mentors of the benefits of mentoring relationships can be an effective recruitment technique as well as a retention tactic. It is commonly assumed that mentors are taking something from the mentoring relationship, thereby explaining their level of involvement. This study explicitly highlights the mentors' perspectives and what they are experiencing as a result of their participation. We attempted to characterize the meaning of the mentoring relationship through mentors' descriptions of their experiences, and made efforts to maintain the meaning of mentors' statements.

The current investigation raises a number of research questions that warrant further consideration. Future studies could focus on the meaning of the relationship for mentees and possibly their families. Specifically, how might mentors' and mentees' perspectives on mentoring relationships differ? Additionally, how might these perspectives compare and contrast to the family's view of the mentor-mentee relationship? Future research should also examine more closely the meaning of trust in the mentor-family relationship, particularly in ethnically-diverse families. The analysis of family interviews, interviews with mentors, and observations of mentor-family activities would provide rich data on the meaning of trust. In particular, an additional phenomenological study addressing the value of the mentoring program and relationship for families could be useful. This is an area of the literature that is very limited. Additionally, a case study of a particular mentoring dyad for which trust was well-established could add to the understanding of the phenomenon. The primary goal of most youth mentoring programs is to promote successful youth development. Understanding the relevant aspects of the mentoring relationship could prove useful in promoting positive youth outcomes.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol – LAMP Mentors

1. What attracted you to become a mentor?
2. Think about what it was like for you before you became a mentor. What did you hope to gain by becoming involved in the mentoring program?
3. Was it hard to get to know your mentee?
4. How did you get to know your mentee? About how long did it take you before you felt or thought that you knew your mentee? Or that you knew each other? How did you know that you had developed an effective relationship with your mentee? What was different?
5. What kinds of things do you do with your mentee? What kind of things would you like to do with your mentee that you didn't get a chance to do?
6. What do you most enjoy? Least enjoy?
7. How would you describe the relationship you have with your mentee?
8. What is "unique" about this particular relationship in your life?
9. Do you continue to build the relationship with your mentee? How?
10. What area or areas of your life have been impacted by your mentee?
11. What are some of the important things your mentee does for you?
12. What would you change about your mentee?
13. How do you feel when you spend time with your mentee? How do you feel before you meet? After you meet?
14. What is something you've learned from your mentee?
15. If you could alter an element of the relationship you have with your mentee, what would it be?
16. What is it about being involved in the mentoring program that you like?

17. Do you think other students should become involved in the mentoring program and why or why not?
  18. What kind of relationship did you have with your mentee's parent/s and/or family? Could you give us ideas or suggestions about how to involve parents or family more in the mentoring program?
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### Author Note

Lisa Knoche earned her PhD in Developmental Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). Her research interests include social development in child care settings, child care characteristics as well as intervention and prevention efforts for at-risk children and families. Her interest lies in developing and evaluating interventions and research methodologies for use with at-risk populations. She is currently a Research Assistant Professor with the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families, and Schools at UNL, and serves as the Project Director for the federally funded *Getting Ready Project: Parent Engagement and Child Learning Birth to Five*.

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