“Brother from another mother”: Mentoring for African-Caribbean adolescent boys

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A B S T R A C T

African-Caribbean adolescent boys in the UK have a risk of developing mental health difficulties but are a challenging group to engage in mental health services. One avenue for promoting the psychological well-being of these adolescents is through mentoring programmes. This qualitative study explored the role of mentoring with African-Caribbean adolescent boys who had psychological and behavioural difficulties. Thirteen mentees and five mentors participated in a combination of focus groups and interviews; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse their accounts and generated nine themes. The accounts highlighted the uniqueness of the mentoring relationship. Strong, emotional bonds were formed between boys and mentors, facilitated by the perception of shared life experiences; boys were able to show their vulnerabilities and accept support. The findings suggest that mentoring can assist at-risk African-Caribbean youth in coping with challenges in their lives and may help to promote positive developmental trajectories for these vulnerable adolescents.

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Introduction

African-Caribbean young people in the UK are more likely to experience mental health difficulties than white British young people. In particular, psychosis is more frequently diagnosed amongst African-Caribbean young men, compared to their white counterparts (e.g. Bhugra et al., 1997; King, Coker, Leavey, Hoare, & Johnson-Sabine, 1994). This is perhaps not surprising, given that these young people experience increased levels of risk factors associated with mental health problems, such as school exclusion, low socioeconomic status, and racial discrimination (e.g. Dalgard & Tamb, 1997; Lowe, 2006). For example, African-Caribbean children are six times more likely than white pupils to be excluded from schools (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998), and 70% of black and ethnic minority communities live in the most deprived areas of the UK (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Research also suggests that African-Caribbean boys are one of the most challenging groups to engage in mental health services. Adolescent boys are less likely than girls to express emotions and to seek help from either within their social network or from professionals (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). There is also evidence that boys are more likely to deny or minimise mental health difficulties or express them externally through violence and substance abuse (e.g. Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, Blumberg, & Jackson, 2003). Compared to white adolescents, African-
Caribbean adolescents in the UK are less likely to access mental health services, and tend to perceive such services as stigmatising, unhelpful and unable to relate to both youth and African-Caribbean cultures (e.g., Street, Stapelkamp, Taylor, Malek, & Kurtz, 2005). African-Caribbean adolescent boys often delay seeking help until difficulties reach crisis point; this is reflected in a greater proportion of African-Caribbean young men entering mental health services through compulsory admission to hospitals or via forensic routes (Keating, Robertson, McCulloch, & Francis, 2002).

One possible avenue for promoting the mental health of African-Caribbean adolescents is through mentoring. Mentoring has been defined as a relationship between an adult and an unrelated younger person in which the adult “provides ongoing guidance, instruction and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee” (Rhodes, 2002, p. 3). A significant body of research has investigated the effectiveness of mentoring, predominantly based in the USA, and has found positive outcomes in the domains of emotional and psychological well-being, problem behaviours, and academic achievement (for reviews, see Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Rhodes, 2008). However, overall, the research suggests that the benefits of mentoring are “modest in size” (Rhodes & Dubois, 2008, p. 255) and may vary considerably depending on the characteristics of the mentee and mentor and the quality of the relationship they form. What seems of central importance is a close and enduring bond, based on trust, empathy and mutuality (Rhodes & Dubois, 2008).

There is a lack of research focusing specifically on mentoring for African-Caribbean adolescent boys. Indeed, empirical studies examining the role of ethnicity and gender in youth mentoring outcomes are sparse. Strong arguments have been made about the benefits of matching mentor and mentee on the basis of ethnicity or race, but there is a lack of clear evidence to support this (Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy, & Sanchez, 2006; Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, 2002). For example, in a comparison of the effects of same- vs. cross-race matches involving minority youth, Rhodes et al. (2002) found no consistent differences and concluded that the impact of ethnicity on mentoring relationships is likely to be subtle and act in combination with other factors such as gender and parental attitudes. Regarding the role of gender, it has been suggested that boys prefer mentoring which is based on shared activities with their mentors whereas girls prefer relationships focusing on emotional closeness and self-disclosure (Darling et al., 2006). However, this assumption is challenged by Spencer’s (2007a) qualitative study of 12 adolescent boys and their male mentors: most pairs described close and enduring emotional relationships which provided safe places for showing emotional vulnerability and experiencing support.

Research focusing on mentoring for adolescents who have mental health problems is also lacking, despite suggestions that mentoring could be beneficial for this adolescent group. In a large-scale, qualitative study of young, ethnic minority users of mental health services across the UK, Street et al. (2005) reported that the young people had a lack of understanding and trust of mental health services, they feared the associated stigma and they found the services difficult to access. One of the key recommendations which came from the young people themselves, and was endorsed by the researchers, was that “some sort of befriending role would be highly useful for young people who are fearful of approaching mental health services” (Street et al., 2005, p. 5). Mentors could provide such a role by working alongside mental health services; in particular, mentors could support African-Caribbean adolescents by providing a link between African-Caribbean communities and mental health services.

Despite the growing evidence base highlighting the benefits of mentoring, the mentoring process will have limited effect unless the young people themselves are able to recognise the potential benefits and are willing to engage with the mentoring relationship. Therefore qualitative feedback from those directly involved is needed in order to gain a greater understanding of how mentoring is perceived by mentees. Although there are a few qualitative studies which have elicited mentees’ and mentors’ views (e.g., Maldonado, Quarles, Lacey, & Thompson, 2008; Philip, Shucksmith, & King, 2004; Spencer, 2007a, 2007b), to our knowledge none has focused on the experiences of African-Caribbean adolescent boys.

The present study explored the role of mentoring with African-Caribbean boys who have mental health difficulties, from the perspectives of both mentees and mentors. It had three main aims: (1) to explore how the mentoring relationship was experienced, (2) to identify what facilitated or hindered the development of the relationship, and (3) to identify what changed as a result of the mentoring. A qualitative approach was used because this is an effective way to gather in-depth information about personal experiences and viewpoints and to allow participants to express ideas which are important to them rather than testing out predetermined hypotheses (e.g., Willig, 2001).

**Method**

**Setting**

Participants were recruited from a community mentoring scheme in London. This had been set up in partnership with a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS: a multi-disciplinary team providing a community-based service for children and adolescents under 18 years old and their families) and a local project which worked specifically with African-Caribbean boys who had psychological and behavioural difficulties. At the time of the study, this project was part of a large London-based charity which ran numerous child and family projects across London. The mentoring scheme was set up in response to the lack of engagement seen in CAMHS services by African-Caribbean boys. The mentoring coordinator attended CAMHS referral meetings and all African-Caribbean boys accepted by CAMHS were referred to the mentoring scheme. Mentors and CAMHS workers were then encouraged to liaise together over the care and support provided for each individual boy.
The mentoring consisted of a one-to-one relationship between a boy and a mentor (an unrelated adult volunteer) who met at least weekly. Each pair of mentors and mentees had the flexibility to decide when to meet and how to use their time together. The mentoring scheme ran in conjunction with other activities at the project, run by some of the mentors, such as life skills training groups, family support and leisure activities. These activities were open to any of the mentees, providing a network of relationships with other mentors and boys. The mentor also usually had informal, social contact with the boy’s family and offered support to the family when difficulties arose. This usually consisted of informal discussions on issues such as improving communication within the family or providing support in relating to other agencies such as schools or CAMHS.

Mentors were African-Caribbean men recruited to the mentoring scheme through advertising and word of mouth within the local community. Prior to being matched with a boy, they completed the project’s mentoring training programme, which consisted of weekly sessions over six months. Boys who were referred to the mentoring scheme were invited to come for a few informal meetings with the mentoring coordinator and to take part in some of the groups and social activities in order to get to know a number of the staff and other boys. The mentoring coordinator then assigned a mentor according to similar interests, personalities and how well the boy and prospective mentor initially related together.

**Participants**

All current mentees in the scheme were invited by the mentoring coordinator to participate in the study. A total of 16 were invited and three declined to take part; no information was available about the mentees who declined. The 13 participants ranged in age from 12 to 17 years; all had at least one parent from an African-Caribbean background, and over half were Jamaican. Eleven had been referred to the mentoring scheme from the CAMHS team and had diagnoses including depression, schizophrenia and ADHD; the remaining two were referred by a youth offending team. Nine of the 13 boys had no consistent contact with their fathers and only one boy lived with both parents. Four of the mentees attended a pupil referral unit or had home schooling, and the remainder attended school or work; seven had police records. At the time of the research, four had been mentored for less than six months, six had been mentored for between six months to a year and three had been mentored for between one to three years.

The mentors for each of the participating mentees were invited to take part in the study and all agreed. Some of the mentors had just one mentee and others had a number of mentees and so a total of five mentors were recruited. All participant mentors were African-Caribbean men in their thirties or forties who had completed the project’s training programme. Three of the mentors worked full time with the project, one worked as a children’s worker with another organisation and one worked for the local council’s housing department.

**Focus groups and interviews**

Two focus groups were run, with five mentees in the first group and eight in the second. Focus groups were used as the main method of data collection for the mentees because it was thought that groups would be less threatening than individual interviews and the mentees were familiar with attending group sessions at the mentoring scheme. The researcher facilitated the focus group and the mentoring coordinator was also present to help with practical arrangements but did not participate in the discussions.

The interview schedule for the focus groups began with open-ended questions about the boys’ understanding and experience of mentoring (e.g. “What comes to mind when you think of mentoring?, “What’s it been like for you, having a mentor?”). It then focused on what helped and hindered the mentoring relationship to develop (e.g. “What’s helped you to get to know your mentor?”, “Is there anything that’s got in the way of getting to know him?”) and the benefits and costs of mentoring, including any changes brought about by having a mentor (e.g. “Does it make any difference to you, having a mentor?”, “Is there anything that you get out of having a mentor?”, “Has it been a hassle in any way?”). Questions were also asked about the boys’ prior expectations of mentoring (e.g. “Think about before you had your mentor, what did you expect it to be like?” “What was it like for real?”).

One of the limitations of focus groups is that they can hinder participants’ voicing individual opinions, particularly if they believe that they are different to group norms or if there are concerns about confidentiality (Kitzinger, 1995). In order to minimise the possibility of the boys feeling inhibited to speak openly in the presence of the mentoring coordinator and the researcher, attempts were made to minimise the power difference. The boys were encouraged to say whatever they wished, whether it was positive or negative, and were reassured that their comments would not result in any negative repercussions. It was evident that the boys had a good relationship with the mentoring coordinator, and they seemed to feel free to talk openly and honestly in front of us.

On completion of the focus group, each boy was also asked to consider volunteering for an individual interview. Of the 13 mentees who attended the focus groups, eight volunteered to be interviewed individually. The interviews focused on the same topic areas as the focus groups and followed a semi-structured format. Participants were first asked for their thoughts on the focus group and whether there was anything that they wanted to add from the group discussion. The questions then moved on to their individual experience of mentoring (e.g. “What sort of activities do you enjoy doing with your mentor?”, “What does your family think about the mentoring?”).

Each of the five mentor participants also took part in an individual, semi-structured interview which focused on the same topics as the focus groups. The questions asked about mentors’ own experience of mentoring (e.g. “What has helped to get the
relationship going?”, “How does the relationship affect you?” as well as their thoughts on their mentee’s experience (e.g. “What do you think your mentee found helpful in getting the relationship going?, “What do you think he gets out of the relationship?”).

Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This is a type of thematic analysis which focuses on the personal meanings that participants give to their experiences; it is particularly well suited to exploring psychological processes. The analysis began with the transcripts from the two focus groups because the mentees’ experiences were the primary focus of the study. Following the steps outlined by Smith and Osborn (2003), themes were identified and then clustered to form superordinate themes. The transcripts from the individual interviews with the mentees were then analysed, using the list of themes from the focus group data as a starting point, in order to identify different or recurring themes. A list of themes from the mentees was then compiled from this analysis. Then the transcripts from the mentors’ interviews were analysed, again using the list of themes from the mentees’ data as a starting point in order to identify similar or different themes. There was considerable overlap between the mentees’ and mentors’ perspectives, and therefore the final list of themes represented an integration of their views.

Guidelines for good practice in qualitative analysis were followed (Barker & Pistrang, 2005; Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). At each stage of the analysis, the themes were checked against the original data to ensure that they reflected the participants' views, and examples from the data were used to document each theme. The analysis was carried out by the first author and a sample of transcripts was reviewed by the second author to check that the analysis was logical and that the themes were consistent with the original data. Discussion between the two authors resulted in some modifications to the clustering and labelling of themes.

Results

The analysis produced three superordinate themes, each with component themes (see Table 1). The first superordinate theme describes how the mentoring relationship was experienced by those involved, the second describes factors which facilitated its development, and the third focuses on what changed as a result of the relationship. Participants’ accounts of mentoring were largely positive, although some difficulties were identified, particularly in relation to setting boundaries and ending the mentoring relationship. The accounts from the boys and mentors reflected similar themes and therefore the results of both groups of participants are presented together.

Quotations are used to illustrate each theme. The source of each quotation is indicated by the letter M for mentors and B for mentees (boys), followed by the participant’s research number. F1 indicates quotations from the first focus group and F2 indicates quotations from the second focus group; it was not always possible to identify the person speaking from the recording of the focus groups.

Superordinate theme 1: ‘brother from another mother’

The mentoring was experienced as a family-like relationship which felt safe, as this extract of consecutive comments from a focus group shows:

‘… a mentor is like a family that’s not blood relative, he’s basically, right, he’s a brother
- A brother from another mother
- A brother or sister, like, who you can trust.’ (F1)

The relationship was depicted as unique: different to relationships within the family and also different to relationships with professionals. Mentors were seen as role models and confidants, and were valued for their informality and flexibility.

Table 1

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Theme 1.1: ‘a male role model’

Both mentors and mentees described the mentor as a father or older brother, providing a role model of what it meant to be male. In particular, mentors seemed to be able to demonstrate how men could talk about emotional issues without this threatening one’s manhood. Some mentors highlighted that their cultural background was important, in order to provide a positive, black role model in comparison to some of the more negative black role models portrayed through the media and music:

‘A lot of the black role models are the wrong ones…a footballer, a drug dealer, a DJ—that’s all they see themselves and that’s based on their imagery…so we can raise their self-esteem and they can see that they have options, not all of us are drug dealers, not all of us are violent, not all of us have braids…” (M5)

The majority of boys did not have fathers living with them and mentoring was seen as filling this gap within the family structure, although there were limitations in what could be provided:

‘…they are like a male figure – like if you don’t have a Dad.’ (F2)

‘…he provides the education of how to be a man…but maybe the young person needs to understand and experience the fact that there is a relationship between this father figure and his mother and the mentor can’t provide that…” (M3)

Theme 1.2: ‘just between me and him’

The boys described how their mentor was someone whom they could confide in, particularly because the mentor was not part of their family. Mentees could offload emotions and secrets, such as trouble they had been involved in, and often this was compared to the more limited information they told their mothers. They particularly valued the confidentiality provided by the mentors; one mentee noted that confidentiality would be broken in certain cases, but there was still the security of knowing that this would be handled professionally, compared to how the family might manage it:

‘Cos there’s some things that you can tell your mentor and he will promise that he won’t tell your Mum…but it can get to the stage where they have to say it, but he’ll notify the person first, but with family they won’t.” (B5)

Although this was a comforting aspect of the mentoring for the boys, it sometimes raised a dilemma for the mentors of how to be a confidant and seen as a friend whilst maintaining their professional role, within clear boundaries of confidentiality.

Theme 1.3: ‘whatever time he’ll be there’

The mentoring relationship was valued for its informality and flexibility. Both groups of participants described the importance of regular contact and also impromptu contact, in particular out of hours contact in response to crisis situations. This availability was often contrasted to CAMHS workers or school counsellors who were only available once a week at a set time, within a very structured environment:

‘And a thing with a counsellor as well they don’t really adapt to the way you want things to be done they’ll just say OK we can set an appointment…..whereas a mentor you can talk to over the phone…it is a more flexible thing to get contact.’ (F1)

As with the previous theme, there was a tension for mentors between wanting to be available and also setting boundaries around their time. Some mentors provided clear guidelines of when they were available whereas others tried to be more flexible.

Both boys and mentors expressed some concerns about the mentors’ longer-term availability. When asked about any difficulties in mentoring, the most common response was about endings:

‘…you can’t really get too attached cos eventually you’re going to have to leave them – that’s a disadvantage.’ (F1)

Strong attachments developed between mentee and mentor and therefore the thought of endings evoked ideas of significant loss for both groups of participants. Some of the boys were unclear about how endings would happen and had not talked to their mentor about this. Some mentors described how it was important to gradually reduce their contact with mentees rather than making a complete break, so that the mentee could still make contact if they wished. However, others felt it was important to make clearer boundaries around endings:

‘The negative side to it is that they become very attached…and we can be in danger of becoming like their fathers – you’re always there for me and next minute you’ve disappeared…so that’s why it’s important to keep it professional – I’m your mentor, not your Dad.’ (M1)

Superordinate theme 2: ‘down the same road’

The key factor which facilitated the development of the mentoring relationship was the mutual identification between mentee and mentor, particularly in terms of background and similar life experiences. Participants described how this led to a strong relationship because it helped mentors to empathise with the boys and, in turn, for the boys to trust their mentor’s advice. It also enabled the mentor to develop a mediating role between their mentee and other adults. Each individual
mentoring relationship occurred within a wider social network of mentees and mentors, providing a sense of community that helped to facilitate the boys’ engagement with the mentoring scheme.

**Theme 2.1: ‘they know where we’re coming from’**

Mutual identification was described by both mentors and boys as being due to common backgrounds, similar life experiences, such as problems at school or being in a street gang, and more minor factors such as similar interests or style of clothes. When asked if they thought that cultural similarity was important, the boys said that it was less important than shared life experiences, although they recognised that cultural background was important at times:

‘…like where discrimination is involved…and if they are the same colour as you, then they know the same kind of situations, but apart from that, no.’ (B4)

Shared life experiences led to a greater empathy and understanding from the mentors, whom the boys described as being able to listen effectively and to ask more pertinent questions:

‘…they could explain in almost full detail what you’re going through and they could understand what you’re trying to say – like you might not make sense to certain people.’ (B1)

The mentors also recognised the value of having similar experiences, but noted that it was important to treat each boy individually and not to assume that they knew what he was experiencing. A number of the mentors described how encouraging it was for them to be able to use some of their own negative life experiences to help their mentees and to show them that change was possible:

‘…you can empower another person in terms of through your experience and it makes you feel so good that you’ve overcome certain things and you can… give back to somebody else…sow a seed in someone else’s life and … see that change…’ (M5)

However some mentors spoke about the difficulties which could arise by over-identification, such as becoming too close or reliving past traumas:

‘…you can resurrect issues that the mentor has had in the past simply because the mentor is dealing with a young person who is suffering the very same issues…for example child abuse can come back to haunt you…’ (M3)

Because they had been through similar experiences, the boys felt that their mentors were able to offer reliable advice which enabled the mentees to trust and respect their mentors:

‘…he’s telling me the honest truth to help me… with my mentor he’ll tell you what happened and the outcome… so that feels like arghh, that could be me basically so I have to listen and take it in…’ (B5)

Some of the mentees compared this advice to other helpers who, according to the mentees, were less respected because their advice was based on theoretical knowledge rather than life experience, even if the advice was similar.

**Theme 2.2: ‘they could explain the situation to whoever needs it’**

The mentors were described as being able to explain situations, concepts and viewpoints to both boys and to other adults, because they were able to understand and relate to both. This ability often developed into a mediating role, for example, mentors negotiated between the police and mentees and they acted as a mediator within families. The mentoring relationship seemed to be strengthened by the boys’ perception of their mentor as a “go-between” who could advocate on their behalf.

This mediating role was particularly important between some of the boys and the mental health services. As a mediator, the mentors could help therapists to understand some of the issues which the boys were facing and helped the boys to understand how therapy worked and how it could be useful for them:

‘…that mentor can come in and explain it if he has that trust… then that’s the opportunity for them to understand where these organisations are coming from and what they’re trying to do…and then maybe they can explain it to them in a way that they can understand.’ (M5)

‘…he knows how to talk to children and he can talk to adults as well so he can sort out more stuff…’ (B7)

**Theme 2.3: ‘you ain’t the only one’**

The mentoring occurred within a wider social context of a network of relationships amongst mentees and mentors. Enjoyable activities, such as meals out and sports, with other boys and mentors helped to establish the individual mentoring relationship and became an integral part of it. Participants noted the mentoring scheme’s sense of community, fun and comradeship, which contrasted with mentees’ descriptions of other relationships with adults as boring and too serious:

‘The doctor kept asking me the same thing every week and he just made you sit in this room for like two hours it was so boring…’ (B8)

This community aspect was also important in dispelling initial, negative expectations of the mentoring scheme. Often the boys had been referred to the scheme because of problems with the police or in school and so it was seen as punishment. One mentee described how his expectations changed:
I thought it was going to be scary – like a youth prison…on my first day… I was upstairs in a meeting and they offered me pizza… I thought OK, it can’t be that bad, cos in prison you don’t get pizza…” (B5)

The social network provided by the mentoring project was seen by participants as a more positive alternative to street gangs, which were associated with anti-social behaviour. The project offered group sessions to talk about issues such as knife crime and sexual health, and this wider network of peer support provided a sense of universality amongst mentees:

‘…you’re round other people that are in similar situations that…makes you feel a bit more confident and that helps you to get things out in the open a bit more…” (B4)

A parallel peer group also developed amongst the mentors, which provided support and friendships for them:

‘…other mentors obviously have encountered things and they will be able to tell you how they coped…so you will be able to learn from that…” (M4)

Superordinate theme 3: ‘a little push in the right direction’

Various changes occurred as a result of mentoring; these were seen as gradual, positive changes as a result of the mentors giving the boys “a little push in the right direction.” (B1). An important change was in the boys’ attitudes towards help-seeking; changes also occurred in behaviour, problem-solving skills and family relationships. The mentors too reported changes, such as finding personal fulfilment in their mentoring work or developing new skills and interests. Supporting the family was an important aspect of the mentoring and changes that occurred within families had the potential of spreading out to the wider community.

Theme 3.1: ‘I’ve learnt that I can’t do everything by myself’

Some of the boys reported that, prior to attending the mentoring project, they often avoided talking about personal issues and tried to resolve problems on their own:

‘I never thought I needed a mentor – like I was cool on my own, like I don’t need to depend on anyone…you couldn’t trust people with it all…like you didn’t want to look bad in front of certain people so you just decided to do it on your own even if you had to struggle…” (B1)

This sometimes made it difficult initially for them to engage with their mentors, especially if they had been let down by others in the past. However this was seen as one of the significant changes that occurred through the mentoring. Some of the boys described learning to trust others within the project, both mentors and other boys, in order that they could talk about personal issues, express emotions with others and learn to ask for help:

‘…things you feel that you need to talk about but you feel like you can’t talk to a teacher… and you can’t really talk to your friends…and you can’t talk to your parents… with your mentor you can talk these things out in the open and they can help you deal with it.” (B4)

The mentoring relationship provided a positive experience of help-seeking, which sometimes generalised to other areas. It seemed to enable boys to be more open to receiving help from mental health services or in school:

‘…like when I was in primary school…and say I didn’t understand the question I’d just leave it and even if I knew I needed proper help, I wouldn’t say nothing about it but now if I don’t understand, it shows that I need help…” (B7)

Theme 3.2: ‘making a difference’

All the participants recounted stories of change and how the mentoring made a difference; some boys described developing new interests and friendships, some boys reported improved communication within the family and some developed greater confidence at school:

‘…before me and my brother always used to argue all the time, but now we don’t argue cos my mentor brought us both together.” (B8)

‘You improve with your mentor…you learn to trust more, right, you learn more verbal and communication skills and you can understand a lot of things better…” (F1)

For some of the mentees, the mentoring had made a profound impact on their lives:

‘…basically I thought I was a hole without my mentor…” (F1)

One of the key ways in which change occurred was through helping the boys to “think before I act”; this phrase was used by a number of the boys as well as the mentors. The mentoring helped the boys to stop and think about what they were doing and to weigh up the consequences of their actions. They described becoming more reflective, considering others’ viewpoints and being more responsible for their actions:

‘…I treat myself with care and I think sometimes before doing stuff, if it’s going to get me into trouble and that… I never used to think of the outcome – I used to just think, oh, it’s fun.” (B5)
Both the mentors and mentees described how committed the mentors were to the work and that the mentoring was more than just a job, but a relationship with a person that they cared about. The boys therefore believed that their mentor would do all they could to make change happen and in turn the mentors described how they also changed – developing confidence, acquiring new skills and knowledge and finding personal satisfaction in their work:

‘It’s a learning curve for me as well. When I came here I wasn’t a confident speaker… and now that is all behind me…I’ve certainly grown.’ (M2)

For some mentors this process of development mirrored similar processes of change that their mentees were experiencing. For example, one mentor talked about the importance of not being self-reliant:

‘… you can’t do it all on your own and so you need to be able to call in others and share what’s going on… so it’s not a job where you’re going to be left on your own so you can’t have that mindset that you can do this all by yourself.’ (M4)

Theme 3.3: changing families to change communities

Mentors stressed the importance of working with families, and not just the boys: they offered informal support and guidance on parenting for families and helped parents to access other services. Mentors would sometimes be invited to family occasions and were seen by many of the families as both a family friend as well as a professional providing a service. They described how the attitudes of parents towards the mentoring scheme had a significant impact on how successful the mentoring was, and some of the boys recognised this too:

‘…[mentors] will talk to the parents, talk to the children and sometimes negotiate in conflict resolution and sometimes also support mum to communicate better to their child…the relationship built with the family unit and the holistic approach…is actually what makes it work.’ (M3)

There was a sense that the mentoring sent out ripples, so that change would spread out from the boys, to their families and then to the wider community:

‘…I think they like it cos they are helping young youths to stay on the straight and narrow…they get a good community.’ (B5)

Change also was seen as being passed on to future generations. As one mentor said:

‘I’ll tell it to the young people – “in 20 years time I don’t want to see your sons here in front of me- I want to see him in front of you and you telling him about life“…and that’s as far ahead I go – so the last thing I want is 3 generations of family being referred to [the project].’ (M1)

Discussion

This study explored how mentoring was experienced by African-Caribbean boys with mental health difficulties. The boys’ and the mentors’ accounts revealed a number of themes concerning the role of the mentor in the boys’ lives, the development of the mentoring relationship, and the changes that mentoring seemed to promote.

The experience of the mentoring relationship

Both boys’ and mentors’ descriptions of their relationship highlighted its uniqueness. Mentors were perceived as extended members of the family (although not subject to the usual family dynamics) with whom boys developed a strong, emotional bond; the relationship provided a safe place for boys to talk about personal difficulties that they tended not to discuss with others in their natural social network. These descriptions of mentoring are similar to those reported in Spencer’s (2007a) study of male youth mentoring relationships, and challenge the assumption that boys are less likely than girls to engage in mentoring relationships characterised by emotional intimacy and self-disclosure (Darling et al., 2006). Indeed, as in Spencer’s study, the mentors in the current study seemed to provide a role model for a less conventional image of masculinity in which mentoring was, and some of the boys recognised this too:

‘[mentors] will talk to the parents, talk to the children and sometimes negotiate in conflict resolution and sometimes also support mum to communicate better to their child…the relationship built with the family unit and the holistic approach…is actually what makes it work.’ (M3)

There was a sense that the mentoring sent out ripples, so that change would spread out from the boys, to their families and then to the wider community:
Indeed, because of the strong attachments that had developed, the idea of ending evoked feelings of significant loss. The uncertainties expressed by mentors and mentees about their degree of contact, both in the present and the future, underline the importance of supervision and support for mentors in managing these issues (DuBois et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2002).

Factors facilitating the development of the relationship

Shared life experiences between mentor and mentee were central to the development of the mentoring relationship for these boys. A sense of “being down the same road” led mentors to identify and develop empathy with the boys; this, in turn, helped the boys to develop trust, which is an essential condition for effective mentoring relationships (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). The boys valued their mentors’ willingness to talk about their personal experiences and respected the advice given, based on these experiences; this is consistent with the idea that “experiential knowledge” is a fundamental aspect of support provided by those who have experienced similar problems (Borkman, 1990). When asked if they thought cultural similarity was important, the boys tended to emphasise similar life experiences, such as problems at school or being in a street gang, rather than similar cultural backgrounds. However, culture and life experiences are inextricably linked, and some of the boys’ and mentors’ shared life experiences were directly related to the context of growing up as an African-Caribbean young man in the UK, such as discrimination. Additional factors, such as similar interests and socioeconomic status, may have contributed to the boys’ identification with their mentor; it is difficult to disentangle these from the role of ethnicity and culture in facilitating the development of a trusting relationship (Darling et al., 2006; Rhodes et al., 2002).

The network of friendships with other boys and mentors provided a broader context of belonging which helped to strengthen the boys’ commitment to the mentoring scheme. It has been suggested that mentoring is more effective when it is embedded in a wider programme of activities and support, and that some mentees may prefer a combination of individual mentoring plus group work rather than one-to-one mentoring in isolation (Newburn & Shiner, 2005; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). This may have been particularly important for the boys in the current study, as African-Caribbean culture places a high value on collectivism and community relationships (Gaines, Larbie, Patel, Pereira, & Sereke-Melake, 2005). The group activities that were part of the mentoring scheme provided opportunities for the boys to learn how to build constructive relationships with both peers and adults, which could potentially assist them in developing new support networks when the mentoring eventually came to an end.

The mentors’ role as a mediator between their mentee and other professionals, such as teachers and the police, also helped to strengthen the mentoring relationship. The boys recognised the value of having such an advocate on their side – someone who could speak their language as well as the language of the professionals. This mediating role seemed particularly important for this group of boys, many of whom had police records and all of whom had been referred to mental health services. For example, mentors encouraged boys to attend mental health appointments and explained, both to the boys and their families, how the service worked. Thus, mentors may have helped to bridge a gap between the mental health services and the African-Caribbean community, reducing some of the barriers to engaging in services that African-Caribbean young men are known to experience (e.g. Street et al., 2005).

Bringing about change

A number of positive changes were attributed to mentoring, although these appeared to be gradual and subtle. Participants described changes in the developmental domains typically assessed in evaluations of mentoring programmes, such as self-esteem and family and peer relationships (DuBois et al., 2002). One of the most significant changes for this particular group of boys was in their attitudes about self-reliance and help-seeking, which is an area not usually included in evaluations of mentoring. In line with research showing that adolescent boys tend to avoid help-seeking (e.g. Rickwood et al., 2005), most of the boys had come to the mentoring scheme with the belief that they did not need help. Their relationship with their mentor afforded what seemed to be a unique experience of asking for and receiving support, and learning that they could trust and depend on others. For some boys there was evidence that this had begun to generalise to other settings, such as asking for help at school. Consistent with Murray’s (2005) model of help-seeking, the mentoring relationship seemed to provide an opportunity for “problem legitimisation”, i.e. deciding whether a problem warrants help from others or not, and a positive experience of help-seeking which had the potential to facilitate future help-seeking.

Of note is that the particular mentoring programme in this study encouraged mentors to develop relationships not only with the boys but with their family; mentors offered support and guidance to parents and there was a sense of “working together”. The effectiveness of mentoring has been found to be enhanced by involving and supporting parents (DuBois et al., 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006), which may account in part for the positive changes described by participants in this study. Indeed, mentors emphasised the importance of their relationships with families and highlighted the potential of mentoring programmes to have an impact extending beyond the individual young person, changing families and possibly even the wider community.

Limitations

This study obtained the views of both mentees and mentors, which is rare in studies of mentoring; their accounts were highly convergent, and this ‘triangulation’ of perspectives lends some support to the validity of the conclusions (Mays & Pope,
However, the study would have been strengthened by also obtaining the perspectives of the boys’ parents or other family members. Like most qualitative research, this study was based on a small, specific sample of participants, and caution must be exercised in generalising the findings to other mentoring relationships.

Participants’ accounts of their experience of mentoring were highly positive. There are several possible explanations for this. First, there may have been a selection bias in that those boys who chose to take part were likely to have been more positive about mentoring than those who declined (although the latter were small in number). Related to this, the sample comprised boys who were currently meeting with a mentor; it is likely that there were boys who had previously dropped out of the mentoring programme or who had been unable to engage with it at all, and their views were not represented. Second, participants may have felt obliged to be positive because they were receiving a service from the project or were volunteers with the project. Third, the presence of the mentoring coordinator at the focus group discussions may have inhibited boys from expressing negative views; however, as noted earlier, an effort was made to minimise the power difference between the coordinator and the boys, and in both the focus groups and the individual interviews boys appeared to talk very openly. Finally, the positive accounts may in part be a reflection of a well-functioning mentoring programme: the programme incorporated evidence-based “best” practices, such as screening and training mentors, arranging activities to facilitate mentor-youth relationship development, and involving parents (Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller, & Rhodes, 2009; DuBois et al., 2002). However, it is clear that difficulties and conflicts can arise in mentoring relationships with vulnerable youth (Clayden & Stein, 2004; Spencer, 2007b), and it is possible that the focus groups and interviews in the present study gave insufficient attention to these.

Conclusions

Research on mentoring for African-Caribbean youth is sparse, and studies using quantitative measures with larger samples are needed to complement the qualitative approach used in the present study. Future research could examine the potential importance of offering mentoring within a wider social context, which was valued by the boys in this study: programmes including group and social activities could be compared to those that just offer one-to-one mentoring. Further research is also needed to explore how mentoring can work alongside mental health services in order to encourage greater engagement by adolescents who are often reluctant to seek and accept help.

For the boys in this study, mentoring provided a unique relationship in which they could show their vulnerabilities and accept support. Strong, emotional bonds were formed with mentors, facilitated by the perception of shared life experiences. The accounts from both the boys and the mentors suggest that mentoring can assist at-risk African-Caribbean youth in coping with the challenges in their lives, and may help to promote positive developmental trajectories for these adolescents.

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References


