

# **Mentoring in social work: key findings from a women's community-based mentoring program**

## **Abstract**

Based on a social intervention research study into mentoring with women from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, this paper considers some of the key differences between traditional workplace and community-based mentoring when used as a social work intervention. The study involved eighteen women who participated in a preparation-for-mentoring groupwork program for twelve months. Eleven of these participants were then matched with a mentor and supported in this relationship for a further 12 months. Qualitative analysis points to three key factors likely to enhance the success of community-based mentoring relationships: (i) relational qualities, such as trust, engagement, and authenticity, (ii) mentees' readiness for change and ability to overcome adversity, and (iii) mentors' practical assistance with tasks and overcoming obstacles. Social workers implementing a community-based mentoring program need to be mindful of the importance of these factors in order to ensure that mentees are supported to engage effectively in any mentoring relationship and overcome structural, community, and familial barriers that may adversely affect them.

**Key words:** Mentoring, women, community, disadvantage

## **Introduction**

Mentoring programs in the workplace and with disadvantaged young people are widespread (see for example, Pawson, 2006; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008; Spencer et al., 2010; Spencer & Liang, 2009). Increasingly, they have been associated with affirmative action for women in

the workplace (Gardiner et al., 2007; Wadsworth, 2002), minority groups (McAllister et al., 2009; Stahler et al., 2005), early-career academics (Gardiner et al., 2007; Tariman, 2009), practitioners in health-related fields (Colalillo, 2007; Ryan, et al.; 2010), teachers (Hudson, 2010; Pegg, Schmook, & Gummer, 2010), and business women in the community (McGregor & Tweed, 2002; Mitchell, 1999).

Studies indicate that successful mentoring is contingent upon both partners committing to the process and sharing responsibility for learning (Barker, 2006; Bidan, 2007; McAllister et al., 2009) in a relationship where instrumental and psychosocial support are provided (McAllister et al., 2009). Mentees need to value life-long learning and be ambitious and confident in their career paths (Smith et al., 2001). Mentors tend to prefer to work with mentees who are honest, competent, conscientious, organised, goal-oriented, self-disciplined, open to new learning, and, relatively speaking, emotionally stable and agreeable (Lee et al., 2000; Ludwig, 2008; Moberg & Velasquez, 2004). When mentees do not demonstrate such traits, the mentoring relationship may break down. Further, the social identity of, and perceived similarities between, mentors and mentees influences each partner's eagerness to participate actively in the mentoring process (Lankau et al., 2005; Pawson, 2006) and some level of reciprocity is important (Shore et al., 2008). Additionally, mentoring with young people has indicated that depression, drug and alcohol misuse, poor health, family problems, limited social skills, or other potentially complex difficulties may adversely affect the mentoring relationship (Barron-McKeagney et al., 2001, 2003). With adults, such personal and emotional issues, as well as fear of failure or lack of time, might impede the mentoring relationship (Ludwig, 2008).

Evidence also shows that mentoring relationships need to be based on trust, engagement, and authenticity (Liang et al., 2002a, 2002b). These relational aspects have significant effects on overall satisfaction (Ensher & Murphy, in press). Mentors should focus

on the personal, educational, or professional learning and development of the mentee and employ a variety of psychosocial, educational, and career-related functions, such as role modelling, counselling, coaching, sponsoring, and befriending (Kram, 1988). Mentor perceptiveness (Gardiner et al., 2000), patience (Allen & Poteet, 1999), extraversion (Lee et al., 2000), optimism (Waller et al., 1999), emotional intelligence (Chun et al., 2010), and self-awareness (Clutterbuck, 2004) are important qualities, along with skills in relationship building, communicating, coaching, and teaching (Barker, 2006; Clutterbuck, 2004; Haidar, 2007).

Although studies of mentoring are wide-ranging, until recently there has been little research on its application as a social work intervention. This could be due, in part, to perceptions of mentors as experts and mentees as passive recipients in need of help much like the approach taken by “friendly visitors” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. To date, mentoring literature in social work has focused on young people (see Pryce et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2010) and social work practitioners and educators (see for example, Boddy, Daly, & Munch, in press; Fouché & Lunt, 2010; Lee & Montiel, 2010). With young people, it has become aligned with the discourse of social inclusion (see Colley, 2003).

Important mentor and mentee qualities and characteristics, along with conditions for effective mentoring relationships described above, have been well documented in the workplace though few studies have examined the relevance of this information for community-based mentoring programs with adult women from disadvantaged communities. Two exceptions are a community-based mentoring program incorporating mentoring into an existing Play and Learning Strategies program (Dieterich et al., 2006) and a multidisciplinary preventative parent mentoring intervention (Zajicek-Farber, 2010). Both studies found women who had a community mentor experienced improvements. For Dieterich et al. (2006) this related to increased improvements in interactive behaviours between mothers and their

children and gains in children's cognitive development than with mothers who did not have a mentor. For Zajicek-Farber (2010) parents with a mentor experienced improved parenting knowledge and practices, as well as greater maternal resilience and better use of family resources. Our study advances these findings by researching women seeking assistance professionally, educationally, and personally.

### **Project overview**

Commencing in 2005 as a collaborative project with the social work program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Housing, and the NSW Department of Education "Schools as Community Centres" Program, this study involved the design, implementation and evaluation of a mentoring program with women from disadvantaged communities. It emerged from a prior study on social capital, which examined women's hopes for their community. In this study, participants expressed interest in developing a mentoring program if they were involved in its design. They wanted an intervention that would give them control and one where they could determine their hopes for the project, rather than one targeted at them as involuntary recipients in need of a welfare intervention. They wanted to be engaged in a program with a focus on employment, education, social, psychological, and personal goals that would create opportunities for them to participate fully in society. This was particularly important in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities where people "tend to show strong interconnections between their life circumstances of poverty and disadvantage and their outcomes in development, health, education and wellbeing" (Hayes & Gray, 2008, p. 4; see also Robinson, 2000). The study described in this article stemmed from these findings.

Eighteen women from four socioeconomically disadvantaged communities joined the project and underwent a twelve-month *Preparation-for-Mentoring Group Work Program*.

The program involved eight four-hour group sessions focusing on five core topics: self-esteem and self-care, exploring hopes and dreams for the future, teamwork, goal setting, and mentoring (see Boddy, Agllias, Gray, & Gibbons, 2008 for a detailed account of the program). Following the groupwork program, mentors were recruited, trained, and matched with mentees for a period of up to twelve months. During this time, mentors and mentees attended separate group meetings – held approximately every six weeks – to support them during the mentoring relationship. Mentors and mentees initially met weekly to monthly for between one and three hours depending on the needs of the mentee. Mentors gave guidance and advice, engaged in problem-solving, challenged mentees, provided practical support, and listened to their mentees' experiences. Most mentoring pairs met less frequently as they progressed and often used telephone calls and email as a method of interacting.

### ***Theoretical framework***

Feminist theory, the strengths perspective, ecosystems theory, and social groupwork theory informed the study. Feminism's critical perspective highlighted the way in which women's experiences were shaped by structural, historical, and contextual conditions in their lives (Gray & Boddy, 2010). The researcher recognised that structural barriers would affect the women in the study - who were all from low socioeconomic backgrounds - by impeding personal development and social progression. These barriers have been found to restrict opportunities for academic advancement and meaningful employment, limit social mobility and access to essential resources, increase the likelihood of domestic violence, physical and mental health, and drug and alcohol problems, and reduce social support systems (Brown & Barbosa, 2001; Ellerbe et al., 2011). While acknowledging the oppressive realities for many women, the strengths perspective recognises that all people have strengths and capacities which they harness to address adversity (McCashen, 2005; McMillen et al., 2004; Saleebey,

2009; Gray, 2010). The researcher valued the women's knowledge and life experience, their strengths and resilience in overcoming obstacles, and their hopes. She affirmed the capacities the women had identified. These were new experiences for many of the women who had come from communities where education and employment were not valued and caregiving was not only prioritised, but also seen as the exclusive domain of women. However, from a strengths perspective, it was important to value the women's caring roles, while also helping them to deconstruct this role-based identity and focus instead on their individual identities (Orme, 1998).

In line with systems theory, the researcher and program facilitator acknowledged the possible tensions and pressures on mentees to conform to their community or family roles. Consequently, women anticipated the resistance that might follow as their new-found freedom impacted on the systems in which they interacted. Additionally, from a feminist-strengths perspective, the researcher sought to understand how the women made sense of their experiences and the structures that affected their lives (Munford et al., 2010) and invited them to reflect on these culturally, historically, and socially (Gray, 2001). Hence a supportive culture was developed with clear guidelines and expectations established and group members were encouraged to keep each other safe and respect the skills, values, and knowledge of others (Boddy, 2009; Agllias, 2011).

From a structural perspective, 'other voice feminism' was valued given its focus on hearing 'women's voices' (Weick, 2000). Women were engaged in a participatory process from conceptualisation and planning to implementation and evaluation to ensure the program was responsive to their needs. This was enhanced by the use of social groupwork theory, which created space to uncover the women's strengths, practise new skills with an audience to support and applaud, and promote a sense of belonging (Boddy, et al., in press). Program development based on participant needs (Munford et al., 2010), as well as active participation,

is not only empowering for the individual learning and practising new skills, but also contributes significantly to meaningful and sustainable community-based interventions (Hills & Mullet, 2000; MacLeroy, 2003) as well as positive psychosocial, health, and economic outcomes for group members (Ohmer & Korr, 2006).

## **Methodology**

### ***Research framework***

The study used a social intervention research approach loosely modelled on the work of Rothman and Thomas (1994). This practice-oriented research approach aims to develop knowledge and improve service delivery, community life, and individual health and well-being. It provides structure to the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of intervention programs, as well as guidance on the knowledge development and utilisation process. Traditionally applied using a positivistic framework, each stage was thought to involve specific activities implemented sequentially. In practice, however, activities in each phase will sometimes continue after the introduction of the next and be repeated or reflected upon when new information is discovered (Rothman & Thomas, 1994). For this study, the intervention research approach was adapted to move it to a more qualitative approach for the women for whom the intervention was designed. It comprised six phases: (i) Knowledge Development, (ii) Knowledge Utilisation, (iii) Design and Development, (iv) Implementation and Monitoring, (v) Evaluation, and (vi) Reporting and Dissemination. The findings reported upon in this paper are drawn from the fourth and fifth stages.

The study was jointly funded by a University of Newcastle Collaborative Grant, New South Wales (NSW) Department of Housing, and NSW Premier's Department, Australia. It was granted ethical clearance by the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee.

### *Sample*

Eighteen women – mentees – commenced and thirteen completed the preparation-for-mentoring program. Eleven of these women entered the next phase of the study – Implementation and Monitoring – where they were matched with a mentor. At the commencement of this phase, the women ranged from 25 to 55 years of age with a mean age of 35. Seven of the women were single and four were married or living in a marriage-like relationship. Ten of the women had left school before commencing senior education (between the ages of 14 and 16). One woman left school after her first year of senior education (at age 17). Ten women had children, and nine of these had dependent children (or grandchildren) residing with them. The women came from three different locations (n= 3, 4, and 5).

Fourteen women – mentors – commenced and completed the mentor training program. Their ages ranged from 29 to 64, with a mean age of 46. Eleven women were employed, two were retired, and one was self-employed (another mentor became self-employed during the course of the program). Thirteen mentors had children. Their professional backgrounds and field of interest varied. They included education, law, real estate, computing, personal relations, kinesiology, herbal therapy, family and community work, career advice, business management, hairdressing, journalism, childcare, and administration. Weekly household income was not assessed. Table 1 describes the mentees, while Table 2 lists mentoring partners.

### *Data collection methods*

The bulk of qualitative data collected included transcripts of group meetings, interviews – including unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and surveys – journal notes – which documented emails, phone calls, and observations of participants – and

meeting minutes. All of this data formed the “text” for analysis. Quantitative measures included participant demographic data and scales measuring social support, hope and optimism, self-esteem, and ego-resilience. Pre- and post-test results from the scales were compared. The scales included the Mehrabian (1998) Self-Esteem Scale, Mehrabian (1998) Optimism-Pessimism Scale, Block and Kremen (in Letzring, Block, & Funder, 1998) Ego-Resiliency Scale, and a Social Support Scale (Everingham, C., personal communication, March 3, 2005).

### *Data Analysis*

Multiple data collection methods and data sources (triangulation) were used to develop a rich understanding of mentoring with women from disadvantaged communities, reduce researcher bias, and increase the study’s reliability and validity. The objective measures – including demographic data and scales which compared pre- and post-test results – were used to highlight the demographic characteristics of mentees and provided objective measures for evaluation, thus increasing the study’s reliability. However, a qualitative analysis was primary. Data was coded and analysed thematically using N-Vivo, a computer software package that assists in qualitative data analysis. It helped the researcher to organise the data, divide it into units, and assign categories and codes.

The researcher determined a preliminary coding scheme, which identified the primary patterns in the data, soon after she had entered the transcripts into N-Vivo. The researcher based the codes on a first reading of the transcripts, the aims and anticipated outcomes from the study, the research questions, and previous research identified from the literature review (Robson, 2002). The coding scheme served as a template for data analysis and changed and developed throughout the data analysis process (Tutty et al., 1996). Themes, patterns, links, and similarities between units were highlighted through the process as well as contrasts

between and within units (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Inconsistencies across the data were considered important, and throughout each reading of the transcript, memos, including comments, reflections, thoughts, and queries were added by the researcher to refine the coding scheme. Given the small sample size, claims cannot be made regarding the generalisability of the findings.

### **Findings and discussion**

This paper reports on findings from phases four and five of the study and highlights the factors common in successful mentoring relationships. To determine this, each partnership was rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the relationship was very successful and 1 indicating it was not. In mentoring relationships rated 5, mentees completed the program, scored highly in either the personal growth or goal attainment scales, and described career, educational, or personal achievements. Their mentoring relationships lasted for the full twelve-month period. In mentoring relationships rated a 4, mentees completed the program, described career, educational, or personal achievements, and their relationships lasted for the full twelve-month period, but mentees scored poorly or returned little or no change in the results of the goal attainment or personal growth scales. In mentoring relationships rated a 3, mentees completed the program, scored highly in either the personal growth or goal attainment scales, and reported educational, career, and personal achievements. However, their mentoring relationship did not last a full twelve months. For those which scored a 2, mentees completed the program, and reported career, educational, or personal achievements. However, the mentoring relationship ended prematurely and poor results were returned in either the personal growth or goal attainment scales. Those rated 1, mentees did not complete the program and the mentoring relationship ended prematurely. The researcher could not

assess changes in scores for the personal growth and goal attainment scales due to withdrawal from the program. Table 3 summarises how the ratings were determined.

As shown in Table 3, of eleven mentoring relationships evaluated, four were very successful, two somewhat successful; three were successful; one moderately successful; and one not successful. The most highly rated relationships were distinguished by certain mentee characteristics, a focus maintained on process- and task-oriented activities, and a strong interpersonal bond between mentoring partners.

### ***Building strong partnerships***

The first condition for successful mentoring related to the relationship itself. Women who experienced successful mentoring relationships (and even those whose relationships were moderately successful) agreed upon important elements related to the interpersonal relationship with their mentor. Mentees commented favourably when the mentor afforded time and importance to the relational aspects of the mentoring process, particularly the development of trust, commitment, and honesty. Mentees appreciated support, encouragement, and flexibility from their mentors. Both mentees and mentors also remarked on the usefulness of some degree of similarity, common ground, or reciprocity between the two parties.

#### *Trust, honesty, and commitment*

Women in this study illuminated the importance of trusting relationships where they felt accepted by their mentor. Rapport was built more easily when the mentee felt the mentor would listen to them without judgement or bias. Christine described her mentor as, “Someone who doesn’t stand in judgement of you, because of what you’re going through. At least with your mentor you can be totally upfront and honest and let it all out”. (Mentee Monitoring

Meeting [MM] two) Trust requires a belief in the mentor despite being in a situation where one might feel potentially exposed to embarrassment or judgement. Mentors who did not rush the mentoring relationship, understood the importance of building trust, and allowed the mentee to determine the pace seemed to elicit more positive relationships. Mentees also spoke about the importance of honesty in the mentoring relationship. Mentees appreciated honest and constructive feedback about their potential and progress. Cassandra said, “as long as the praise isn’t bullshit; it needs to be true and real.” While mentors felt most comfortable offering choices and options rather than advice, mentees also appreciated advice from the mentor as long as it was perceived as protecting their best interests.

It was important that mentors were able to challenge mentees’ negative beliefs or behaviours and constructively and sensitively entreat them to consider alternate perspectives, particularly towards the middle of the relationships when trust and safety had been established (Cohen, in Mott, 2002). Women in this study said that they appreciated honest and considerate feedback through questioning, direct statements, or praise for constructive beliefs or behaviours. Mentees found it helpful to be challenged about unhelpful beliefs and thoughts and practices that interfered with their progress towards their goals. Gina and Joan both said they would check-in with their mentees first before challenging them, sometimes asking for permission to do so. Amy’s mentor, Joan said when we first started, sometimes Amy would say things and I would say, “Do you want me to be honest with you and tell you what I think”. (Mentor MM five)

Similarly, Allen and Eby (2008) found a positive connection between the level of mentor commitment and mentee reports about the quality of the relationship. Mentees especially considered mentor commitment important to the relationship by being available to, or making space for the mentoring relationship, and attending scheduled meetings.

Unexpected emails or telephone calls reminded some mentees of their mentor's support and availability. Cassandra said:

My mentor is really encouraging. I get an email out of the blue and it's making me feel like the bees knees, "you're full of great ideas dahdidah," and it was just a real boost for me and it was at a time when I couldn't care less . . . (Mentee MM two)

Mentees who experienced successful mentoring relationships also committed to meeting with their mentors regularly and attending group mentee meetings.

*Support, encouragement, and flexibility*

Mentors' support and encouragement featured most frequently in the mentees' comments along with listening and empathy. Mentors encouraged their mentees in a variety of ways. They provided encouragement when the mentee was feeling discouraged, offered support during difficult times, and noticed and highlighted mentee strengths and abilities. They affirmed their mentee's decisions (when considered appropriate) and conveyed belief or faith in their ability. Levesque, et al. (2005) describe this function as "acceptance and confirmation," which involves communicating acceptance of and respect for the mentee, while also indicating "approval, even in times of failure" (p. 433).

Mentor Diane, reflected, "I'm just somebody in the background who keeps her motivation ticking over, like having somebody there she feels accountable to" (Mentor MM six). However, the effects of supporting and encouraging appeared to be more important than this suggests. This type of support seemed to increase mentee confidence, encourage a greater belief in self and ability, and offer motivation to keep moving forward. Lauren stated:

I wouldn't have done it [updated my resume]. My resume would have stayed the same, without that encouragement and perseverance from my mentor, it wouldn't have changed, and so her perseverance and encouragement has made me take that step.

(Mentee MM one)

Effective support and encouragement required flexibility and responsiveness to immediate and changing needs. Mentors (and mentees) who were able to focus on the relational process and respond flexibly to challenges and obstacles appeared to report more positive experiences. This is consistent with some studies which have highlighted the importance of the interpersonal dynamic in the mentoring relationship (Nielsen & Eisenbach, 2003). According to Liang et al. (2002a), women favour relationships which are process-oriented and involve authenticity, empathy, and empowerment. Such characteristics significantly affect the amount of mentoring that occurs (Neilson & Eisenbach 2003). The Relational Model theory of women's psychological development (Jordan et al., in Liang et al., 2002b) explains that women prefer a focus on the relationship process to one primarily aimed at achieving outcomes. Some mentors in this study reported on their growing recognition of the importance of process and flexibility over goal attainment. Gina said:

I was judging myself as a mentor on her ability to achieve and do, and when she said that ["you make me think"] it was like, "oh, well if you don't do that [goal] that's ok," because there is this other process that has to be done first. . . It was like a bombshell.

(Mentor MM two)

*Perceived similarity, common ground, and reciprocity*

Perceived similarity also emerged as important to the mentoring relationships, acting as a stimulant for conversation. Vanessa said, “Well she’s got kids as well, that’s what started us off yesterday, and we started talking about my daughter and her son and we moved on to other stuff and it was good” (Mentee MM two). Similarity between the parties indicated that there was potential for trust and understanding. A number of studies have shown that satisfactory relationships are often associated with perceived similarities, while dissatisfaction is associated with perceived differences (see for example, Eby et al., 2000; Ensher et al., 2002; Lankau et al., 2005). In instances where the mentees perceived differences between themselves and the mentor, primarily they were socioeconomic differences. However, these did not appear as important as other factors and did not appear to alter the duration or quality of the mentoring relationship. It may be that perceived similarities overrode socioeconomic differences. In one instance where a mentee felt her mentor could not understand her because she did not have children, socioeconomic differences were felt more acutely.

Reciprocal relationships based on equality were also important to many mentors and mentees. Mentors employed several strategies to create equality within the relationship, including reframing the relationship as a ‘peer relationship’ or ‘buddy system’. For example, Angela described her relationship with Christine as “probably a little less mentoring and more an exchange of ideas” (Mentor MM one). Relationships where mentors shared some of their own lives and experiences appeared important to mentees, and contributed to reciprocity. It was important for mentees to give back to their mentor, whether this was listening to them talk about their week, offering advice, or giving practical assistance. Lauren said, “We tend to talk about how our week ...We give each other advice, or I’ll say something and she’ll go yeah I should consider that too, so we sort of have a two way thing” (Mentee MM three). Reciprocity appeared to cement the foundations of trusting and non-judgmental relationships

and supported perceived similarity and equality. Reciprocity is often cited as a feature of a strong relationships as well as community participation and belonging (ref). Also an active position in the mentoring relationship might have indicated the women's growing confidence and capacity to engage in different relationships as a partner, rather than only a recipient of support and guidance.

### ***Adversity, resilience, and readiness***

#### *Adversity*

One of the most significant differences between traditional mentoring programs and this one was its inclusion of women facing multiple, complex, and enduring levels of adversity. This created considerable challenges for mentees to remain engaged fully in the mentoring process. Angela, said, "Those peripheral issues, which are peripheral to us but practical everyday issues for them [the mentees], mean they need social support, as well as mentoring" (Mentor MM six). Many of the challenges were interrelated. For example:

She [Vanessa] is in a situation where she is fairly physically isolated. She's out of town. It's not easy for her to get into town. I think between her and her husband they have one vehicle which is a gas guzzler. So going places is not only about whether she can get the vehicle, it's about how much money has to be put into the vehicle to go wherever she is going. (Belinda, Mentor MM six)

Further, health conditions affected some mentees, and delays in public health provision meant some mentoring goals had to be delayed or revised. Mentees regularly faced financial barriers to the mentoring relationship and goal attainment. Barron-McKeagney et al. (2001, 2003)

reported similar issues for participants in their Family Mentoring Program, which targeted ten-year-old at-risk Hispanic children in the United States. They found that mentors:

encountered numerous, mostly unavoidable, barriers to setting up and maintaining regular mentoring contacts, for example, the family's lack of phone service, lack of parental transportation, difficulty reaching families due to long working hours or relocations, and family and child problems requiring professional interventions (Barron-McKeagney et. al., 2003, p. 59).

Another powerful barrier to successful mentoring relationships and goal attainment appeared to originate from mentees' communities and families, including a lack of support to pursue new goals and pressure to conform to the social expectations of others. Sometimes dominant family and community members had strong expectations about the mentee's roles and goals and this could be a source of internal conflict for the mentee. For example, mentor Gina said: "I think too she's grappling with people in the community who want to keep her in that [volunteer] role" (Mentor MM one). When Gina challenged her mentee to remove the word "volunteer" from her resume, Lauren responded: "'Oh they wouldn't like that'" (Mentor MM one). Lauren decided to go ahead and remove the term.

Family and community responsibilities sometimes stood in the way of the mentoring relationship. Justine said, "I haven't really spoken that often with my mentor. I haven't got the time, I've been really flat out this year with family and home" (Mentee MM one). This is consistent with Chandler's (1996) comments that often women were inclined, "to make their family responsibilities a priority when making career decisions" (p. 94).

### *Resilience and readiness*

It is interesting that the most successful mentoring relationships were not necessarily those with mentees who experienced the least amount of adversity and community pressures. Instead, it was the relationships where the women displayed high levels of resilience in the face of adversity and a readiness to make life changes – by persistently working towards transcending barriers to goal attainment – that had most success. Resilience has been described as one's successful adaption when exposed to stress and crisis. Research recognises resilience as a contextual process in a facilitative environment, rather than the result of individual psychological or personality traits. Ungar (2008) defines resilience as:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of the individual to *navigate* their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to *negotiate* for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (p. 225).

This definition is important to understanding how the mentees displayed and developed resilience. Resilience was not only the mentee's ability to acquire necessary resources for change, but it was also about doing this collectively with their group of peers and with their mentor. In this way, the resources acquired, such as confidence and positive thinking, were meaningful and useful to participants. For example, with the support of the group and their mentor, Lauren and Christine both attained employment through the course of the mentoring program, despite their lack of formal education and qualifications and numerous unsuccessful applications. Christine recalled:

I just sent this one [application] in at the neighbourhood centre. . . When I went for the job it was just such a great interview. I was there for over two hours and we laughed and I knew I had the job, I just knew it... I looked great, I felt great. All the way home I was going, "I've got the job, I've got the job!" I just knew that I had it. (unstructured evaluation interview after program completion: interview transcript)

Christine's mentor affirmed her experiences, brought attention to her strengths and abilities, and helped her to match her strengths with external and internal resources (ie. Christine had experience in volunteer welfare work and Angela provided support, guidance and practical input to help Christine gain employment with a welfare organisation); a process described by Turner (2001) as a 'resilience enhancing intervention' (p. 444).

Characteristic of resilience was a readiness to change, willingness to learn, and openness to new ideas. Thus, it was the 'capacity of the individual to *navigate* [her] way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their well-being' (Ungar, 2008, p. 225). For example, Lauren, who met fortnightly with her mentor, commented on how her openness to new ideas helped her progress towards her goals:

She's [Gina] helping me change and think about things and moving forward to where I want to go. I always say "I can't do that" and one of the things from when I was growing up [was the message] "If you're meant to be rich, you'd already have it." And my mentor gets me to write these beliefs down and then write down, "Well is that true?" and think about is this true . . . and do I need to change my belief system and that kind of stuff. It's been really good actually. (Mentee MM two)

Lauren's experience highlights the value of an ecological model of resilience, which requires mentors to demonstrate an understanding of the mentee's worldview and communicate an acceptance of the mentee's experience of her own ecosystem. This in turn promotes psychosocial competence (Clauss-Ehlers & Levi, 2002) and ensures the mentoring reflects "who they are, what they value, and who they want to become" (Clauss-Ehlers & Levi, 2002, p. 277). In this way, mentoring was not about coming into the relationship 'already resilient' but a process, whereby mentors and the group helped mentees to build this.

Mentors commented positively about working with mentees who appeared ready for change. Joan described a mentoring session where she met with her mentee Amy in a park and they spoke about how Amy might let go of past hurts and look to the future. Joan said:

I felt really excited for her that she was actually thinking about all her hopes and dreams and thinking about what she wants out of her life and what she wants to achieve. So that was a really beautiful day . . . and after that, she was a lot more serious about what she wanted to achieve before the end of the year. . . it seemed like it made a difference. (Mentor MM three)

Mentors who felt their mentees were contemplating or not yet ready for change were more likely to describe feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction. Liz described her frustration about Cassandra's progress saying, "I also have a feeling that she puts up these barriers, and even though she says she wants to move on, deep down, at the moment, I don't think she is ready to." When asked what this was like, Liz replied, "Oh, it's really frustrating lately" (mentor).

### *Practical assistance and task orientation*

In terms of mentoring success, practical assistance and a task orientation were important to the women. Such mentors appeared to recognise the aforementioned structural barriers to success, and worked with the mentee to stand against - or navigate around - them. They took on task-oriented functions, including practical assistance, guidance, training, and advice-giving, which were just as important as psychosocial functions. Assisting mentees apply for employment, by updating their resumes and jointly responding to selection criteria, gathering information about courses and referring mentees to websites, was useful to mentees and appreciated throughout their mentoring relationships. Christine remembered:

One email I said to her, “Look, I can’t even think to put a cover letter together, my brain it just won’t put it together.” And she said, “Alright let’s work through this slowly. What’s the position, where’s it at?” You know and she worked with me on that, and that’s the only thing that got me going. (unstructured evaluation interview)

The importance of practical support is consistent with finding from McAllister et al.'s (2009) study, which found that mentees valued instrumental support from their mentors. Along with practical assistance, mentees in successful relationships often commented on how their mentor had provided them with new ideas and advised them on a constructive course of action. In contrast, two mentees who ended their relationship prematurely commented that they would have appreciated more practical assistance: “She’s got lots of suggestions, but I’ve got to do all the work, she could give a little bit more practical support, even just finding some phone numbers for me or looking over my CV” (Heather, mentee survey one). Positive mentoring relationships also seemed to include mentors who were able to appraise situations,

encourage problem solving skills, and plan steps towards achievement. Gina reflected on how she had worked with her mentee, Lauren, to facilitate her learning:

There's a lot of ground work and education that needs to be done in order to achieve things. So we're slowly working through that. I'm trying to allow her to come up with the answers and the decisions by giving her the information. (Mentor MM one)

Working incrementally, or 'taking small steps,' was also important in the task or goal elements of the relationships. Mentees reported positively on mentoring relationships where options were offered and small goals were set and afforded importance, but not rigidly adhered to.

### ***Are there ideal conditions for entering a community-based mentoring relationship?***

The workplace literature reports on key conditions necessary for mentoring success. While some of these conditions - such as trust, honesty, commitment, and perceived similarity - were important to the mentees and mentors in this study, others were not. For example, the workplace literature emphasises the importance of mentees being conscientious, open, emotionally stable, and agreeable (Lee et al., 2000) without personal and emotional issues, such as fear of failure (Ludwig, 2008). These qualities were rarely mentioned in this study. In fact at times mentees expressed "fear of failure", and this was often used as an opportunity by mentors to challenge their mentees and build on their strengths (Saleebey, 2009). This was received positively by mentees. Additionally, qualities such as commitment to life-long learning, competence, determination, organisational skills, goal orientation, and confidence in career path (Smith et al., 2001; Ludwig, 2008) were not mentioned by mentees or mentors at all in this study. Instead, mentees in successful mentoring relationships demonstrated a

readiness to make life changes and an ability to overcome adversity. This is important to note because many of these women faced considerable daily challenges and regular adversity as they navigated family responsibilities, childcare, familial and community expectations, and for some, addictions. Thus, inclusive, community-based mentoring programs may be used to promote social inclusion with women (see Ellerbe et al., 2011; Hayes & Gray, 2008). Findings from this study showed that a simultaneous focus on building strong mentoring relationships and attending to tasks to alleviate adversity were much more important than prerequisites, such as stability, conscientiousness, and confidence in career path. Indeed, strengths-based practice recognises the value of a “practical, problem-solving orientation” (McMillen et al., 2004).

### **Implications for practice**

A key finding of this study was the subtle, but important, differences between mentoring as a workplace intervention and mentoring as a social work intervention. Social workers incorporating a mentoring program with adults into their practice need to be mindful of the nuances of community-based mentoring. For example, unlike workplace mentoring, it needs to be expected that mentees will likely experience numerous structural barriers and community pressures that adversely affect their ability to engage in a mentoring relationship. In these instances, mentees need to be supported to make life changes and overcome adversity, thus assisting them to take full advantage of the mentoring relationship. This support needs to be characterised not only by a focus on practical assistance, but also on encouragement and flexibility, affirmation of experiences and strengths, and an appreciation of the mentees worldview. This stands in direct contrast to the workplace literature which suggests that mentors prefer to work with mentees who are organised, goal-oriented, self-

disciplined, and emotionally stable (Lee et al., 2000; Ludwig, 2008; Moberg & Velasquez, 2004).

A key addition to the discourse on mentoring in the community is the value of using a strengths-based, feminist practice framework, that adopts an ecological understanding of resilience. This makes way for the inclusion of all interested participants in the program even if they are not ‘high-performing’, as is often the case in workplace mentoring programs (see for example, Lee et al., 2000; Smith, 2001). It is important to note, high levels of mentee adversity might not indicate a lesser chance of success, so women should be included in programs if they feel they might benefit. Thus, people should be included irrespective of whether or not they have personal and emotional issues - such as drug and alcohol addiction, mental health conditions, unstable housing, or current exposure to domestic violence - or demonstrate qualities observed in the workplace literature on mentoring. Community-based mentoring programs should also seek to empower participants, not necessarily through anti-oppressive practice, but through harnessing participants’ abilities, hopes, and talents. Such programs should not rely solely on individual mentoring, but as with most community projects, also be facilitated through the medium of groups. Training programs should acknowledge and address the likelihood of structural barriers to mentoring success and provide practical information to mentees and mentors to help alleviate such issues. Additionally, program providers might consider offering financial and practical assistance, such as taxi fares and child-minding, to intercept cyclical barriers to success.

Supported by the workplace literature on mentoring (see for example, Ensher & Murphy, in press; Liang et al., 2002a, 2002b), and confirmed by this research, is the need for mentoring partnerships to be focused on relationship building and the development of trust, honesty, commitment, and reciprocity. Such aspects significantly affect mentee satisfaction (Ensher & Murphy, in press). The value of interpersonal knowledge and skills should be

emphasised in initial and ongoing mentee and mentor training. At times it may be the ability to say something useful, albeit potentially hurtful in a constructive and caring manner that positively affects a mentee's development and growth.

Further scholarship is needed around mentoring in social work. Literature to date has largely focused on mentoring clinicians and young people, with limited literature examining mentoring as a community social work intervention with adults. Given the value of mentoring reported in research literature, particularly in this study and in workplaces, more attention needs to be given to this as a viable community social work intervention.

## **Conclusion**

Findings from this study suggest that there are three key elements for successful community-based mentoring with women from disadvantaged communities. First, the relationship building process must be valued. Secondly, mentee readiness for change, and ability to overcome adversity, correlates with successful mentoring relationships. Thirdly, mentoring should be task focused and mentors should provide practical assistance. The intersection of these three conditions is extremely important and should be coupled with a strengths-based, inclusive approach to practice. For example, without a sound interpersonal relationship built on trust, mentees are less likely to accept advice or practical assistance. Further, without practical assistance to overcome financial difficulties and other structural barriers, mentees are less likely to have time and energy to invest in the relationship or mentoring goals and without a readiness and ability to transcend structural barriers, it is less likely that a good mentoring relationship will be built with a focus on tasks, goals, and outcomes. Ultimately, mentoring can be used as part of social work practice and these findings may offer clues for the development of future community-based mentoring programs.

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