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Exploring the benefits and risks of mentor self-disclosure: relationship quality and ethics in youth mentoring

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ABSTRACT

Evidence shows that self-disclosure plays an important role in developing and maintaining close interpersonal relationships. As self-disclosure remains largely unexamined in the context of interventions based on youth-adult helping relationships, little is known about the effects of mentor disclosure, or the ethics of using this communication technique. In this study, we used self-report questionnaire data from 51 mentoring pairs to investigate the effect of mentor self-disclosure on relationship quality in youth mentoring relationships, and consider the ethical challenges that arise when helping adults disclose to young people. Bivariate correlations showed mentor self-disclosure was significantly associated with relationship quality for mentees, but not mentors. Qualitative content analysis showed mentors were aware of how their disclosure may have ethical implications associated with the age and role-appropriateness of topics, contradictions between their own and the mentees' family or cultural values, and the potential to negatively influence mentee behaviour. We consider these findings in a context of ethics in youth mentoring to raise questions about the intersection of disclosure, relationship quality, and safe mentoring practice.

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Introduction

Positive youth development is enhanced by the presence of supportive relationships with non-parental adults (Rhodes 2004; Scales et al. 2006). This premise has long fuelled the interest in relationship-based programmes that enable helping relationships between adults and young people, such as those practiced in youth mentoring and youth work. The youth-adult relationship is the cornerstone of these programmes, enriching the lives of young people through adult support and guidance in the context of a close and trusting relationship. Evidence indicates that relationship quality enhances intervention effectiveness (DuBois et al. 2002; Nakkula and Harris 2005), providing further incentive to identify and understand the interpersonal processes which contribute to high-quality helping relationships. As such, national bodies for youth mentoring and youth

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work in Aotearoa New Zealand actively promote the value of such relationships, and offer training and resources to helping adults in an effort to strengthen their interpersonal skills and ultimately facilitate the development of positive relationships with youth, in a safe and effective way (New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network 2016; Deane et al. 2019).

In relationship science, self-disclosure is widely accepted as having a significant influence on the development of interpersonal relationships (Guerrero et al. 2007; Tardy and Smithson 2018). In particular, self-disclosure promotes closeness and trust, both of which are highly desirable traits in youth-adult helping relationships (Altman and Taylor 1973; Rhodes 2004). Although there is a small, emergent body of research on self-disclosure in youth mentoring, there is still much to be learned about how it effects the mentoring relationship, positively or negatively (Karcher and Hansen 2014; Dutton et al. 2019). To expand our understanding of self-disclosure in the unique context of youth-adult helping relationships, here we examine mentor self-disclosure with respect to its potential benefits and risks to mentoring relationships. We investigate the link between mentor disclosure and relationship quality as a benefit for mentoring relationships, as well as drawing out some ethical complexities associated with self-disclosure that may present as a risk to relationships.

Background

Self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships

There is a long history of self-disclosure theory and research in relationship science, as disclosure is recognised as a common method of communication in many types of relationships (Guerrero et al. 2007; Tardy and Smithson 2018). Self-disclosure typically encompasses any information about the self that is shared with someone else, including personal histories, interests, dispositions, behaviours, feelings, values, and opinions (Jourard 1971). Self-disclosure is typically positively associated with the development of close, trusting interpersonal relationships, based on theories such as Social Penetration Theory (SPT) which describes how people develop bonds with others through self-disclosure (Altman and Taylor 1973). SPT theorises that individuals develop closeness and intimacy with others through the systematic and gradual use of self-disclosure over time. Generally beginning with superficial disclosures about the self, the information shared during interpersonal interactions increases intimacy. As this occurs, feelings of closeness and affection are fostered, and the relationship deepens. Conceptualisations of disclosure within SPT include dimensions of breadth (amount of disclosure) and depth (intimacy of disclosure; Altman and Taylor 1973). The dimension of depth provides the theoretical grounding for the widely used onion metaphor of self-disclosure, whereby self-disclosure functions as though we are peeling back layers of ourselves to share with another. Outer layers contain superficial information about the self (e.g. hobbies and interests), followed by moderately intimate personal information (e.g. religion and health). The inner layers of the onion represent the most intimate information a person could share (e.g. sex and inner fears). Thus, interpersonal closeness increases as we share more of ourselves with someone.

Another theoretical framework that is useful for understanding self-disclosure in youth mentoring is help-intended communication (Goodman and Dooley 1976). This is a framework of communication skills designed to support non-professionals – like youth mentors – engaged in helping relationships. It identifies six communication micro-skills that map on to specific intents: questioning is used to gather information; advisement for guiding behaviour; silence provides interpersonal space; interpretation can explain someone's behaviour; reflection and paraphrasing express empathy; and self-disclosure facilitates connection by revealing oneself (Goodman and Dooley 1976). Non-professionals can use these micro-skills to meet specific communicative goals in their relationship. In youth mentoring specifically, Keller (2005) briefly theorised about the changing nature of self-disclosure as mentoring relationships develop. He describes self-disclosure during the initial stages of mentoring relationships as one avenue for mentors and mentees to get to know one another, while disclosure later in relationships may deepen feelings of intimacy.

Although the youth mentoring literature lacks research on self-disclosure, there are some useful studies regarding the link between relationship quality and communication more generally. For instance, Karcher et al. (2010) explored two types of conversation and their effect on mentor-reported relationship quality using data from over 400 mentors in a school-based mentoring programme. They found relational conversation – such as casual conversation on topics like family and friends – made a greater contribution to relationship quality than goal-oriented conversation about school, behaviour, and future aspirations (Karcher et al. 2010). Elsewhere, Pryce and Keller (2013) described how mentor-mentee communication contributed to the interpersonal tone of mentoring relationships. One group of dyads, labelled 'engaged', were characterised by their easy, fluid communication with one another and mutual disclosure about their personal lives. In comparison to other pairs, engaged pairs reported higher levels of closeness, enjoyment when spending time together, and overall relationship quality (Pryce and Keller 2013). These findings point to the influence particular ways of communicating have on mentoring relationship quality, but the scarcity of such studies means our collective understanding of the power and effect of communication in the mentoring context is limited.

Risk and ethics in youth mentoring relationships

Historically, a significant portion of the literature on youth mentoring has investigated the effectiveness of mentoring as an intervention. More recently, there has been a concerted shift to examining specific mechanisms within mentoring that may explain or improve effectiveness, including a considerable emphasis on developing high-quality relationships (Varga and Deutsch 2016). These strands of research have been motivated in part by an acknowledgment that mentoring can have iatrogenic effects on mentees, and that as a field, we need to take necessary steps to ensure any potential negative outcomes are minimised. For instance, important research about the impact of failed relationships on mentees has stimulated discussion on how to improve the longevity of relationships (Spencer 2007; Spencer et al. 2020).

There has been little theoretical discussion about the ethics of mentoring more generally. Rhodes et al. (2009) use the American Psychological Association's Code of

Ethics as a basis for the development of ethical principles in mentoring, such as promoting the welfare and safety of mentees, acting with integrity, and respecting the rights and dignity of mentees. Within the principles, discussion of disclosure is almost exclusively focused on when disclosures are made *to* mentors, from mentees or their family, with little direction regarding how mentors may engage in ethical disclosure. One exception is a mention of the potential harm when mentors engage in ‘improper disclosure’ as a consequence of having inappropriate boundaries (Rhodes et al. 2009, p. 454). The authors note that clear directives regarding appropriate boundaries are made difficult by the highly contextual nature of mentoring (i.e. things that are appropriate in one relationship may not be appropriate in another). These boundaries are complicated further by the unbalanced power dynamic inherent in a youth-adult relationship, and the fact that mentors often inhabit multiple roles in the relationship – part friend, teacher, family, and therapist for instance (Goldner and Mayseless 2008; Rhodes et al. 2009).

Where the ethics of disclosure is concerned, the literature regarding how adults may influence youth behaviour is particularly relevant when considering disclosure. Mentors are often expected to be role models for mentees (Rhodes 2004), and may therefore exert some degree of influence on mentee attitudes and behaviours. Research exploring important non-parental adults in the lives of adolescents, for instance, found greater reports of misconduct amongst boys who perceived these adults as engaging in problem behaviour (Greenberger et al. 1998). The same study also found adolescent boys and girls were less likely to engage in misconduct when their important non-parental adults were perceived as disapproving of such behaviour. From another perspective, there is also research which shows some mentees, particularly older adolescents, respond positively to mentor disclosure, interpreting it as a marker of trust and honesty in their relationship (Liang et al. 2008). Although these studies provide interesting insights, it is also apparent that the literature on both disclosure and ethics in mentoring is limited. As a field, it is critical that we promote practices that develop high-quality relationships, because it is on this basis that mentoring is most likely to have a positive effect. However, even with the potential benefits of disclosure to relationship quality in mind, the unique characteristics of youth–adult relationships potentially introduce ethical hurdles that need to be managed.

In sum, the rationale driving recent research on self-disclosure in the mentoring context concerns relationship quality. The evidence suggests disclosure can contribute to relationship development, so in mentoring or youth work – where the core ‘business’ is relationships – the influence of disclosure on relationship quality matters deeply. Yet, there is scant empirical evidence about the ethics and risks of self-disclosure in a youth development context. The unique characteristics of this context, particularly regarding power dynamics and our collective responsibility towards the young people we work with, requires serious attention to possible risks. Therefore, although the potential benefits to relationship development may be the primary rationale for conducting research on disclosure, this must be mediated through an ethical lens.

It is for these reasons that both of these dimensions – as different sides of the same coin – are explored in this article. We use our findings from a study designed to examine the link between mentor self-disclosure and relationship quality to raise compelling and critical questions about the ethical implications of a specific communication

technique which is readily used by mentors (Dutton et al. 2019). In doing so, we hope to further our understanding of how youth-adult helping relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere may be safely supported and enhanced by the important work done by our mentors and other helping adults, like youth workers.

Research questions and design

This study is part of a broader project about self-disclosure in youth-adult helping relationships. We conceptualised this particular study as a mixed-methods investigation of the benefits and risks of mentor self-disclosure, driven by two research questions and using data from self-report questionnaires completed by mentoring pairs. First, regarding the foremost potential benefit of self-disclosure, we asked: is mentor self-disclosure associated with mentor and mentee reported relationship quality? Then, to analyse potential risks of self-disclosure, we used qualitative questionnaire responses from mentors to explore our second research question: what kinds of ethical issues do mentors consider when deciding whether or not to engage in self-disclosure? Together, these questions were designed to further broaden the literature base on self-disclosure in youth mentoring by addressing two aspects of this phenomenon that need to be better understood in order to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks associated with mentor self-disclosure. We elected to use a mixed-methods design for this study as it allowed us to use complementary methods that were best suited to the specific research questions we had (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Quantitative methods are best suited to investigating questions of statistical association, like our first research question, whilst the qualitative content analysis design was suitable for our question regarding ethics, as it is more exploratory in nature (Elo and Kyngäs 2008).

Methods

Participants

Fifty-two mentoring pairs, recruited from nine mentoring programmes in Auckland, New Zealand participated in a study examining the critical ingredients of youth-adult partnerships. At the start of the study, we approached 19 mentoring programmes in Auckland that included mentoring relationships that met the eligibility criteria for the study: relationship length (three months minimum) and mentee age (12–18 years old). The eligibility criteria ensured participants were in an established youth mentoring relationship (Keller 2005). Of these programmes, five gave us permission to promote the study to mentoring pairs at a programme event. During these events, interested mentoring dyads provided their contact details to us for further information and arranging research sessions. Over the course of the data collection period (2017–2019), we were made aware of several other programmes in the region, leading to participants from four other programmes being recruited for the study: one of these leads came from a youth mentoring conference, one via word of mouth, and two from advertisement of the study on Facebook.

Mentors were aged between 19 and 59 ($M = 35.25$, $SD = 11.04$), and were predominantly female (69%). Participants had the option to identify with one or more ethnic

backgrounds. Seven mentors (14%) identified with two or more ethnicities. The largest group was Pākehā/New Zealand European (55.8%), followed by Pacific Island (17.3%), Māori (13.5%), Other European (11.5%), Other (9.6%), and Asian (7.7%). Most mentors were in full-time employment (71.2%) and almost one-quarter were university students (23.1%). A majority of mentors had received some mentor training (86.5%) and just over half had previous experience as a mentor (55.1%). Mentees were aged between 12 and 19 ($M = 16.11$, $SD = 1.49$), with one mentee turning 19 between signing up for and then completing the study. Like the mentor sample, most mentees (75%) were female. Over one-third of mentees identified with two or more ethnicities (36.7%). Three mentees did not answer the question on ethnic identity, but of the other mentees, 63.3% identified as being of Pacific Island heritage, as well as New Zealand European (22.4%), Māori (22.4%), Asian (16.3%), Other European (6.1%) and Other (4.1%). Consequently, most dyads (78.4%) were cross-cultural. Relationship length ranged from three to 26 months ($M = 8.53$, $SD = 5.60$), and on average, pairs met twice per month for 2.43 h.

While all 52 mentors completed the questionnaire and are included in the quantitative analyses, only a subset completed the qualitative questions. The group of mentors whose comments were used in the content analysis closely resembles the full cohort: largely Pākehā/New Zealand European (52.9%), female (70.6%), in full-time employment (70.6%), with previous experience as a mentor (52.9%). No qualitative data were gathered from mentees.

Procedure

Following recruitment, pairs attended a research session at the University of Auckland. The sessions included self-report questionnaires and dyadic activities which were video-recorded for later analysis. This study uses quantitative and qualitative data provided by mentors and mentees in the questionnaire, which was administered electronically using Qualtrics software prior to engaging in the dyadic activities. Mentors and mentees completed the questionnaire in separate rooms to ensure confidentiality from one another. A researcher was present in both rooms to answer any questions mentors and mentees had. The questionnaire typically took 20–30 min to complete. The University of Auckland Human Ethics Committee granted approval to conduct the research and each mentor and mentee received two movie ticket vouchers for their participation.

Quantitative measures

Based on our first research question, we hypothesised that higher mentor self-disclosure would be associated with higher mentor- and mentee-reported relationship quality, as SPT and other theories of disclosure suggest. We identified four possible confounds and included them as covariates in our analyses: sex, mentee age, previous experience as a mentor, and relationship length. Sex has been associated with self-disclosure, with evidence suggesting women disclose more than men (Dindia 2002). In addition to the link between relational conversation and relationship quality for younger mentees described above (Karcher et al. 2010), mentees have been found to have developmental differences in how they perceive disclosure of risk behaviours by natural mentors (Liang

et al. 2008), which may impact their rating of relationship quality. Previous research (e.g. DuBois et al. 2002) has indicated mentors from a helping background increase the effectiveness of mentoring, and may be able to develop better relationships with mentees. Relationship length has been associated with mentoring relationship quality, with dyads in longer relationships typically reporting better quality (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). Based on these hypotheses and theoretical associations, we proceeded with the following measures.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure was captured using the Mentor Self-Disclosure Instrument (MSDI; Dutton et al. 2019). The MSDI is based on a questionnaire used in counselling (Jourard 1971) and adapted to suit the youth mentoring context, asking mentors about the personal information they have shared with their current mentee during their mentoring sessions. Mentors were asked how much they had disclosed about 46 items, on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *told mentee nothing*; 7 = *told mentee most things*), which was then recoded for analysis (0 = *told mentee nothing*; 6 = *told mentee most things*). Items included disclosures about hobbies (e.g. *my favourite ways of spending spare time*), school and work (e.g. *how I feel about the choice of career/study that I have made*), emotions (e.g. *things in the past or present I feel ashamed and guilty about*), values (e.g. *what I think and feel about religion*), substance use (e.g. *my personal views on smoking cigarettes; y personal habits of smoking cigarettes, current or previous*), sex and sexuality (e.g. *my sexual orientation*), and money (e.g. *how much money I make at work or get as an allowance*).

To calculate self-disclosure, we considered two dimensions based on SPT:

- (a) How much they disclosed about these items. We summed mentor responses across all items on the 7-point scale, where higher numbers indicate disclosing a greater amount. The maximum score possible, if a mentor told their mentee most things for all items, was 276 (i.e. disclosed the maximum of 6 on all 46 items). This represented the breadth of disclosure.
- (b) How intimate they considered the items to be. Items were allocated an intimacy rating from 1 (least intimate) to 10 (most intimate) by two graduate students with youth development expertise who were independent of the study. We summed the intimacy rating for each item a mentor disclosed on (i.e. disclosure on items in tier 1 received a value of 1, items in tier 2, a value of 2, and so on to tier 10; see supplementary information for a list of items in each tier). This process generated a score that represented the depth of disclosure, whereby higher scores represented greater disclosure on intimate topics.

Using these breadth and depth scores, we calculated a theory-driven, multi-dimensional total self-disclosure score by multiplying the amount of disclosure indicated on the 7-point scale (i.e. breadth) by the appropriate topic intimacy weighting (i.e. depth) for each item, and then summed. The possible range for total self-disclosure was zero to 1398.

Relationship quality

We wanted to use a relationship quality measure which focused on the relational bond, since it is the characteristics of such a bond (e.g. closeness and trust) which are associated with self-disclosure. Moreover, we wanted to use the same measure for mentors and mentees to ensure both parties were reporting on the same aspects of the relationship. We were unable to locate a measure which met these criteria in the youth mentoring literature and therefore elected to draw on relationship science to develop one. We proceeded with a measure which asked participants to rate their mentoring relationship across six dimensions on a 7-point scale: satisfaction, commitment, closeness, trust, enjoyment, and liking. These dimensions were selected as theoretically relevant for our purposes based on youth mentoring, self-disclosure, and relationship science literature (Collins and Miller 1994; Fletcher et al. 2000; Rhodes 2004; Nakkula and Harris 2014). An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with direct oblimin rotation indicated all items met the criterion for recommended factor loadings ($>.40$; Stevens 2002; see supplementary materials) and loaded on one unidimensional relationship quality factor, as anticipated. Internal consistency of the relationship quality scale was high for both mentors (Cronbach's $\alpha = .811$) and mentees (Cronbach's $\alpha = .902$).

Covariates

As noted previously, we included four variables as covariates to control for potential spurious associations that could be attributed to the theoretical confounds described earlier: mentor sex, relationship length, mentee age, and previous experience as a mentor. We used mentor-reported sex only, as almost all dyads (93.8%) were matched with the same sex. All participants identified as male or female. Mentors reported how many months they had been in a relationship with their mentee, and we interpreted previous experience as a mentor as indicative of having a helping background.

Qualitative responses

Qualitative data for the content analysis was collected as part of the MSDI, as participants were prompted to provide more information regarding their responses to the quantitative questions. They were not specifically asked about ethics; rather, they responded to an item about their general thoughts on disclosure considering 'the circumstances or context of the conversation, how you felt during the conversation'. This prompt was given once in each of the three sections of the MSDI which address different topics of self-disclosure (see Dutton et al. 2019 for further information), so mentors could provide up to three qualitative responses.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis

We exported the Qualtrics questionnaire data into IBM SPSS Version 26 for analysis. A missing values analysis showed there were no data missing for the self-disclosure, relationship quality, sex, and relationship length variables. Three participants did not answer the question regarding previous experience as a mentor so analyses with this

variable proceeded with a slightly smaller sample. The assessment for normality identified an extreme outlier in the mentee-reported relationship quality data. We elected to remove this case from the dataset, leaving a total sample of 51 dyads.

We first analysed bivariate correlations between self-disclosure and relationship quality and the four possible confounding variables – sex, mentee age, relationship length, and previous mentoring experience. As well as the total self-disclosure score, we included the breadth and depth variables to check for multicollinearity. This analysis showed Pearson's r ranging from .849 to .982, $p < .01$, a high degree of collinearity that suggests the dimensions were essentially measuring the same construct (Dormann et al. 2013). On this basis, and for ease of interpretation, we removed breadth and depth variables from analysis and proceeded with the total self-disclosure only.

Qualitative analysis

We elected to use an inductive approach to content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008) given the limited corpus of literature regarding self-disclosure and ethics in youth mentoring. Moreover, as these data were collected via a questionnaire rather than other qualitative means which have more scope for depth and interpretation of participant responses (e.g. follow-up questions in an interview), we used semantic coding that focused on explicit meanings in the text (Terry et al. 2017) supplied by mentors.

Most mentors ($n = 40$, 75.5%) included at least one qualitative response when they completed the MSDI, with a total of 103 responses overall. To begin the content analysis, the first author did a preliminary read through all qualitative responses to identify those which were pertinent to issues of ethics in self-disclosure. After the first reading, 38 comments from 25 mentors were identified for potential inclusion in our analysis. Then, the first and second author reviewed this subset of comments using the following guideline for inclusion: 'mentor comments that address the ethical tensions of self-disclosure'. We did this independently to determine the degree of concurrence regarding what responses met the guideline. Following our independent reviews, we agreed on the relevance of 30 comments (22 for inclusion, 8 for exclusion) and disagreed on eight comments. We then met to discuss the comments we disagreed on, and concluded that five would be included in the study and three would not. The final set of 27 comments came from 17 mentors (32.7%). We then read through all the comments twice, first identifying initial categories for coding, then a second time to refine the language and scope of the categories. Ten categories for the content analysis were developed (see Table 1). Each mentor response was sorted into at least one of these categories, with a total of 53 codes allocated across the set of 27 comments.

Results

Quantitative results

Descriptive analyses showed mentors disclosed on an average of 23.75 ($SD = 9.39$), with a range of 6–42 items. This is consistent with the findings from our previous study, which used the MSDI with a different sample (Dutton et al. 2019). The mean number of items disclosed was slightly lower for male mentors ($M = 22.88$, $SD = 7.89$) when compared to

Table 1. Frequency and exemplars of codes from content analysis.

Code	Description	Frequency	Example
Appropriateness of disclosure	What disclosures are appropriate (or not) for sharing with their mentee	11	I prefer to make our mentoring sessions or catch ups more about my mentee and discussing her life situations rather than my own. I will only bring up my own life experiences when it is appropriate to do so.
External factors	Factors in the mentee's or mentor's context that influence whether or not a mentor discloses	11	The nature of our relationship and her religious background mean that I would not feel comfortable sharing my views on a lot of these topics. She is from a particularly church-focused family who don't drink, etc. and I don't think it's my place to interfere with this
Concealment	Descriptions of concealing information during incidents of disclosure, including use of vague or non-specific disclosure to avoid sharing certain details	8	I don't think I have concealed a lot of information, but I also haven't presented it to her. I think there is a difference between concealing and not presenting it.
Disclosure as a learning tool	Justifying disclosure, particularly on sensitive or intimate topics, on the basis of using disclosure of negative personal experiences as a learning tool for mentees	8	If she approaches me regarding topics such as drinking, or boys, I try to be open in giving some examples of my experiences, what happened, how I felt, what was the outcome, so that she can get an understanding of what happens and the consequences of our actions.
Consequences of disclosure	Mentor concerns about having undue influence on the mentee's behavior or attitude, or the mentoring relationship, if they disclose	5	I tried to be as neutral as possible because I didn't want to seem as though I was trying to impose my thoughts and feelings onto her experience, I wanted to make sure my language was neutral and non-judgmental but inside my brain was screaming 'DON'T LEAVE SCHOOL!!! PLEASE!!'
Mentee initiation of mentor disclosure	How mentees asking mentors to disclose influences their decision to disclose (or not)	4	There are times when you speak about these things and there are times when you do not. Unless my mentee would personally ask me these questions or we got onto the topic somehow, then I would answer the question with thought and consideration.
Over-sharing	Mentor concerns about engaging in too much disclosure, particularly about their own emotional state	3	I try to keep our conversations positive and forward focused, rather than me dwelling on any negative experiences about my life
Mentor role	How the role of mentor has a specific influence on how they disclose	1	[mentee] has a friend whose mentor is gay so she talks about her friends experiences and feeling of uncertainty around that and that's when I give my perspective of not judging others ... I get the feeling my mentee doesn't have the space to discuss sexual preference with adults, just among her friends, so I try and offer that space.
Power dynamic		1	Generally, I try to be open with my mentee but remembering that I'm an

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Code	Description	Frequency	Example
	Acknowledgement of the power relationship between mentor and mentee		adult and she is at school and considered a minor.
Shame	How mentor shame about topics under discussion influences their decision-making regarding disclosure	1	I do not tend to delve into the details of what I have done in the past as I am not perfect and have done some things I have not been proud of.

female mentors ($M = 24.14$, $SD = 10.08$) but this difference was not statistically significant. Mean ratings of relationship quality were high for both mentors ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 0.59$) and mentees ($M = 6.15$, $SD = 0.77$).

The bivariate correlation results shown in Table 2 indicate mentees reported higher ratings of relationship quality when their mentor engaged in more self-disclosure. Self-disclosure had no effect on mentor-reported relationship quality. Female mentors reported higher relationship quality, as did mentors who had previous experience as a mentor and those in longer relationships. Mentor and mentee ratings of relationship quality also correlated with each other. Due to differing associations between self-disclosure and mentor and mentee reports of relational bond, multivariate analysis was not conducted as it was not deemed appropriate.

Qualitative results

The results of our content analysis are shown in Table 1. Mentors appeared to be highly conscious of managing their boundaries regarding disclosure. Sometimes this was done simply by labelling a topic as (in)appropriate with no explication as to why they came to this conclusion. In other instances, they described their decision-making more fully, which resulted in separate codes to capture these justifications. The most common was external factors that influence their disclosure. Mentors cited family, religion and culture, neighbourhood and socio-economic status/privilege, the mentoring programme, as well as a non-specific 'different background'. In most instances, mentors said these factors prevented them from disclosing, demonstrating an awareness of their responsibility to avoid contradicting what the mentee hears or experiences in their own context. Similarly, a number of mentors commented on their concealment of personal

Table 2. Bivariate correlations of self-disclosure, relationship quality, and covariates.

Variables	Mentor sex	Mentee age	Rel. length	Prev. experience	Self-disclosure	Mentor RQ	Mentee RQ
Mentor sex	–						
Mentee age	–.204	–					
Rel. length	.270	.110	–				
Prev. experience	.011	.186	.105	–			
Self-disclosure	.119	–.097	.293*	.119	–		
Mentor RQ	.475**	–.074	.317*	.293*	.219	–	
Mentee RQ	.097	–.208	.248	.080	.330*	.320*	–

Note: Sex coded as Male = 0, Female = 1.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < .01$.

information. These insights – which were sometimes general statements about why they might not disclose something, and at other times more specific – reflect a common approach to disclosure, whereby mentors justified their concealment with a mentee-oriented rationale. This included, for example, comments regarding the ‘best interests of the mentee’ and trying to ‘create a positive experience’ for mentees.

While external factors typically hindered disclosure, some mentors justified the use of disclosure by framing it as a ‘lesson’ that mentees could learn from. By disclosing in this way, these mentors hoped their mentees would avoid making the same mistakes by promoting greater understanding, particularly when faced with new and complex experiences of adolescence. In contrast, a few mentors described their concern that if they disclosed about something negative – experiences at school or body image, for instance – that this may have an undesirable influence on their mentee’s behaviour, rather than providing corrective advice to avoid negative behaviours. In a similar but distinct comment, one mentor described avoiding a particular disclosure as it was associated with feeling ashamed of something they had done in the past. While much of the reasoning around disclosure tends to be mentee-oriented, this is an example where the mentor’s own feelings hinder disclosure and may be too personal to be reframed as a self-disclosure to be learnt from.

There were other less common codes that provide interesting insights about how mentors experience ethical tensions in their role. Mentee initiation of mentor disclosure typically provided an impetus to engage in, rather than avoid, disclosure. Under this code, mentor comments acknowledged that even when discussions turn towards topics mentors might ordinarily refrain from disclosing about, if their mentee directly asks them to disclose, they take that request seriously and attempt to answer honestly. The solitary comment regarding mentor role was also framed as a reason to disclose. In that instance, the mentor described sharing their opinions on sexuality and noted that because their mentee did not have another adult in their life to talk about this sensitive topic with, as a mentor they had to take on that responsibility. Lastly, mentors were also cautious about over-sharing through disclosure. These comments implicitly suggest an awareness of the power differential in mentoring relationships (something only explicitly mentioned by one mentor), as ‘dwelling’ on their own life may be an emotional ‘burden’ for mentees.

Discussion

This study was designed to explore the benefits and risks of mentor self-disclosure – namely relationship quality and ethical issues – in youth mentoring relationships. In the first instance, this study provides preliminary evidence that mentor self-disclosure makes a positive contribution to mentee-reported relationship quality. We suggest that receiving disclosure is generally interpreted positively by mentees and thus influences their perception of the mentoring relationship (Liang et al. 2008; Ahrens et al. 2011; Varga and Deutsch 2016). Mentor self-disclosure may act as an invitation into the mentor’s world, to know and be known by the other (Dindia 2002), and young people may not experience such an invitation from other helping adults in their lives (e.g. teachers, coaches). We acknowledge that the findings of this study, including a significant linear relationship between disclosure and mentee reported relationship quality, would

suggest that more self-disclosure equals higher relationship quality and therefore mentors should be encouraged to engage in more disclosure. However, we caution against this interpretation. It is possible that there is a 'tipping point' with disclosure, where mentor self-disclosure becomes a burden to mentees and begins to have a detrimental effect on relationship quality. The lack of empirical research on mentor disclosure means we cannot rule out this possibility, nor can we test it with the current dataset given its limited statistical power. It may also be the case that the mentors in our sample largely refrained from disclosing to this extent so it did not emerge from our data. We encourage future research in this space.

Broad encouragement of mentor self-disclosure should also be tempered by meaningful consideration of the ethics of disclosure. The highly contextual nature of disclosure means that there may be instances when disclosures that *could* promote relationship quality still ought not to be disclosed for broader ethical reasons, some of which were explicitly and implicitly mentioned by our participants. Many of the comments were, to some degree, about managing appropriate boundaries for disclosure. Mentors and other helping adults have an ethical obligation to establish and maintain boundaries in their relationships with young people (Rhodes et al. 2009). However, research has also shown that mentees appreciate mentors who are open and authentic with them, and disclosing on personal and even sensitive topics is one way mentors can demonstrate their feelings of trust and closeness with their mentees (Liang et al. 2008; Shier et al. 2020). In our study, several mentors mentioned how they carefully consider mentee requests for mentor disclosure, seemingly acknowledging the value of honesty and trust to relationship development. Avoiding or rejecting opportunities for such disclosure may inadvertently signal to mentees that their mentor does not trust them, or does not consider their relationship to be a space for open and honest sharing with one another (Murphy and Ord 2013). However, mentors also have legitimate concerns about disclosure. We saw that with regards to respecting mentee's family and cultural contexts, thoughtfully considering the influence they have on their mentee, and even respecting their own emotions, such as shame. We argue that to best equip mentors to negotiate these tensions, self-disclosure should not be conceived as an either/or option: there are, for instance, ways to disclose in purposefully ambivalent ways which may signal trust and closeness, while avoiding detail that broaches ethical boundaries.

In line with much of the broader literature on self-disclosure, our previous work on mentor disclosure has framed self-disclosure as a communication technique that could have considerable benefits for the development of close, trusting relationships (Dutton 2018; Dutton et al. 2019). However, self-disclosure is not, by default, a positive interaction, particularly in the context of youth mentoring. Rather, there are important tensions held in the defining characteristics of these relationships which may influence whether the potential benefits of disclosure are realised. Underscoring all youth-adult relationships – whether in mentoring, youth work, or other contexts – is an imbalanced power dynamic. Although this was explicitly mentioned by only one of our participants, adults hold more power than young people, even in those relationships that are mutual and resemble a close friendship (Goldner and Mayseless 2008). Thus, mentors exhibit a hybrid power structure that combines the authority of hierarchical, vertical relationships (like a parent or teacher), with a lack of permanence typically associated with egalitarian friendships – as volunteers, mentors can end the mentoring relationship at any time

(Keller and Pryce 2010). This hybrid model represents a complex context for disclosure, as the friendship influence on the mentoring relationship invites self-disclosure as a normative method of communicating among peers (Radmacher and Azmitia 2006; Goldner and Mayseless 2008), but the influence of authority and responsibility may compel mentors to withhold disclosure.

As we noted earlier, an important assumption that underscores the self-disclosure literature is that more disclosure is better because more disclosure means greater closeness and intimacy in a relationship. This may hold true in many relationships between adults. However, once again the unequal relationship between a mentor and mentee creates complexities for understanding disclosure. One concern is the developmental readiness of mentees, particularly if mentors are disclosing information of a more intimate or sensitive nature as young people typically have a lower capacity for managing the emotional burden of disclosure (Koerner et al. 2002). However, mentors who are used to engaging in disclosure with another adult may not realise the potential for emotional burden in the mentoring relationship, and how it may affect the mentee. A second concern relates to the content of disclosure, especially with regards to intimate disclosures on topics such as substance use and sex. Disclosure on such topics requires thoughtful mentor discretion to make good decisions about when and how such disclosures are appropriate, especially considering evidence regarding the influence non-parental adults can have on young people (Greenberger et al. 1998; Liang et al. 2008). Factors that may influence these disclosures include whether it is initiated or requested by the mentee, the length and stability of the relationship, or whether the disclosure involves the mentor's general opinion on a topic or specific details of their own experience. These judgements need to be negotiated by mentors in an ever-changing context that is influenced not only by the mentor and mentee, but the expectations and boundaries set by the mentee's family and the mentoring programme. Based on the content analysis here, as well as a previous study (Dutton et al. 2019), mentors appear to be consistently aware of their responsibilities not only to the mentee, but to these additional parties who make the relationship possible. In particular, we have previously reported on how mentors perceive self-disclosure in the context of cross-cultural relationships – in this case, primarily between Pākehā mentors and Pasifika mentees – and the responsibilities mentors feel towards their mentee's family in these relationships (Dutton et al. 2019).

Nonetheless, even with these tensions in mind, we posit that an advantage of mentor self-disclosure predicting mentee reports of relationship quality is that disclosure is a purposeful communication tool which can be used strategically by mentors to maximise benefits to their relationship, as proposed by Goodman and Dooley (1976). As such, programmes should consider including a focus on self-disclosure in their mentor training, in preparation for the early stages of the relationship when disclosure is most likely to occur naturally (Keller 2005) and to navigate the self-disclosure tensions that commonly arise as these relationships progress. This fits naturally with training on ethics in mentoring. Initial training should also be coupled with ongoing supervision that provides opportunities to confidentially process such ethical dilemmas when they surface. Although discussion of professional supervision for youth mentors is scarcely discussed in the international mentoring literature, engaging in supervision is an expectation for youth workers (whether in voluntary or paid roles) in Aotearoa New Zealand (Korowai Tupu 2020).

One reason why we conducted this research focusing on the mentor's self-disclosure is that it is relatively easier for programmes to inform and instruct mentors on specific mentoring practices that are advantageous (or not) for relationship development, rather than targeting mentees to engage in specific behaviours. Self-disclosure is especially well-suited to this approach, since it is a highly reciprocal process which increases in value and practice during adolescence (Camarena et al. 1990; Radmacher and Azmitia 2006). Mentors can therefore model self-disclosure for mentees, inviting reciprocal disclosure from the mentee, and positively influencing relationship quality, which in turn may contribute to the effectiveness of mentoring.

Limitations and future directions

Our use of the MSDI in this study showcases both its usefulness and its limitations. It has previously been used for descriptive purposes, and to that end was helpful for illuminating how prevalent and diverse mentor self-disclosure is: as with the earlier study (Dutton et al. 2019), mentor disclosure in this sample was widespread and provides empirical evidence of an otherwise largely ignored phenomenon in youth mentoring. However, there are also limitations when it comes to interpreting and understanding the highly contextual nature of self-disclosure, as well as complex, multi-faceted issues like ethics. Research which is dedicated to gathering qualitative data from mentors is much needed to mitigate any potential harms or ethical breaches associated with disclosure (Rhodes et al. 2009; Dutton 2018). Moreover, furthering our understanding of the context and effect of disclosure necessitates research from the perspective of mentees, mentoring programmes and the families of mentees to build best practice guidelines regarding mentor disclosure in youth mentoring relationships.

The small sample size of this study limits interpretations of how the findings can be extended to youth-adult helping relationships more generally. It is possible that less powerful effects were not picked up by the analysis, or that effects that did present are a characteristic of this specific cohort of mentoring dyads. As the pairs self-selected into the study, they likely represent higher-quality pairs with a strong commitment to the relationship. Nevertheless, our sample did include mentoring dyads from a range of different programmes – a rarity in this field – and results regarding self-disclosure prevalence patterns replicated a previously published study (Dutton et al. 2019). Moreover, the cross-sectional design of this study limits our capacity to ascertain the directionality of the relationship between self-disclosure and interpersonal closeness. Much of the literature on self-disclosure espouses a particular directionality in the disclosure-closeness relationship, whereby more (or less) disclosure produces greater (or lower) relationship closeness. However, some scholars have argued this assumption is predominantly based on Western (particularly North American) conceptions of relationship development, and thus the purpose and function of self-disclosure may be different in other cultural contexts (e.g. Adams et al. 2004). Given the large number of culturally diverse youth in mentoring and youth work in Aotearoa New Zealand, a better understanding of the cultural use of self-disclosure would be helpful.

Overall, more research on self-disclosure is needed to fully understand the role and influence it has in youth-adult helping relationships. Given the fundamental importance of communication to good relationships, it seems prudent for researchers to explore this

area more fully. There is considerable consensus in Aotearoa New Zealand regarding the importance of helping relationships to youth development (Deane et al. 2019), and those adults who work with youth should be supported by evidence-informed policy and training that takes careful consideration of the ethical dimensions of these relationships.

Conclusion

Youth-adult helping relationships that are the heart of mentoring and youth work can be successful at promoting positive outcomes for youth. In particular, enhancing the quality of mentoring relationships is paramount for both youth outcomes and making mentoring a safe and positive experience overall. Equipping helping adults with specific skills for developing high-quality relationships with young people is one way programmes can make steps towards intervention effectiveness.

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