

Mentoring University Students with ASD: A Mentee-centered Approach

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Abstract This study presents a conceptual understanding of how mentorship is experienced by the participants of a mentorship program for university students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. We interviewed the participants of the Autism Mentorship Initiative at Simon Fraser University. A grounded theory approach was used to systematically organize data from interviews and documents to reveal themes that were salient to the mentees (students with autism; $n=9$) and mentors (neurotypical students; $n=9$). The following five main themes were identified and interrelated under the core theme of A Mentee-centered Approach: (1) The Natural Progression of the Relationship, (2) The Supportive Mentor, (3) The Meeting Process, (4) Identifying and Implementing Goals, and (5) Learning Together. An in-depth analysis of a mentorship process is described.

Keywords Autism spectrum disorder · Mentorship · Mentee · Mentor · Self-advocacy · University

Introduction

Post-secondary enrolment rates for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are increasing (Alcorn MacKay 2010; BCTF 2012; Chown and Beavan 2012), yet there is

a stark lack of research on how to best support these students within these settings (see Gelbar et al. 2014; Pinder-Amaker 2014 for recent reviews). Indeed, the unique needs of students with ASD, such as severe difficulties with social communication and interaction, presence of unusual or repetitive behaviors, and difficulties with transition and changes in routine (APA 2013), are not commonly addressed through standard accommodations that are offered by resource-stretched university disability offices (Ames et al. 2015; Chown and Beavan 2012; Drake 2014; Smith 2007; VanBergeijk et al. 2008). University students with ASD also face elevated rates of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, which is exacerbated by social isolation (Gelbar et al. 2014). As a result of these challenges and a lack of support, many students with ASD do not make it through university. For instance, postsecondary completion rates (including those from 2- to 4-year, and vocational/business/technical schools) for students with ASD are 38.8%, compared to 51.2% in the general population (Newman et al. 2011). These statistics surely reflect wasted potential, and so it is important that we understand how to best serve students with ASD so that they can thrive in the university context.

To address the intensive individualized needs of students with ASD, a service delivery model that is gaining momentum is that of peer mentoring (Ames et al. 2015; see also; Chapman 2013; Loots 2009). In this model, a neurotypical peer serves as a mentor to the student with ASD, meeting regularly over the course of the school year. The pairs work on areas that have been identified as priorities by the student with ASD, spanning academic (e.g., study skills, managing workload), social (e.g., making friends, joining clubs), communication (e.g., talking to professors and classmates), job and career (e.g., developing a resume, doing an interview), and wellness (e.g., stress management,

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coping with anxiety) goals. Over the past decade, peer mentorship has shown some promise in supporting students both with disabilities (Ames et al. 2015; Appel 2011; Jones and Goble 2012) and without disabilities (Jacobi 1991; Tremblay and Rodger 2003; Loots 2009). Peer mentorships are known to provide a connection between college and its resources while providing safe, supportive relationships (Coles 2011). In doing so, peer mentorships can increase the well-being of first-year students by relieving anxiety around navigating university life (Tremblay and Rodger 2003) and enhance student performance by promoting both academic and social integration (Loots 2009). While peer mentorships have shown to be promising for students in helping them adjust to college, little research has been produced that describes mentorship programs designed to specifically consider the needs of students with ASD.

Ames et al. (2015) recently reported the results of an evaluation study of the Autism Mentorship Program (AMP) at York University. The first of its kind in Canada, this study provided positive support from the perspective of 12 students with ASD who were involved in the program. Through end-of-year surveys, students reported high levels of satisfaction both with the overall program and with its subcomponents (e.g., one-on-one meetings with a mentor). Students were also asked about the kinds of self-identified goals addressed by them and their mentors, and not surprisingly, developing social skills was the most frequently described goal (75%), followed by romantic relationships (58%) and mental health concerns (58%). Encouragingly, the majority of students indicated that the program helped them achieve their goals.

Despite the promising results reported by Ames et al. (2015), the field lacks a conceptual framework for how mentorship is experienced by university students with ASD. While theoretical models exist for mentoring more broadly (see Crisp and Cruz 2009), these models differ dramatically depending on the specific population being studied, as well as the context in which mentoring occurs (university, community college, K-12 education, industry). Indeed, there is acknowledgement that mentoring for disadvantaged or minority students may be fundamentally different than mentoring for majority students, with the former involving more deliberate efforts to provide support through frequent contact between mentors and mentees (Cohen 1995; Crisp and Cruz 2009) and a focus on individualistic goals both within academic areas and beyond (i.e., social skills; Ames et al. 2015; Heck-Sorter 2012; Jones and Goble 2012). Critically, to date there are no existing conceptual frameworks for mentorship of university students with ASD, which potentially limits our understanding of how to best serve and support these students.

In the present study, rather than focusing on the outcomes of a mentoring program, we focused on identifying

the components that constitute mentoring by exploring the experiences of mentors and mentees (Nora and Crisp 2007). As a first step towards developing a conceptual framework for mentoring university students with ASD, a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015) was used to systematically organize the data and identify themes that were salient to both mentees and mentors involved in the program. Grounded theory provides a set of useful research strategies for exploration of a phenomenon. A grounded theorist begins with a general research question instead of a preconceived hypothesis (Charmaz 1990) and explores the experiences of participants in order to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or process. A grounded theory design is a qualitative procedure through which the researcher generates theory that explains a phenomenon or process at a broad conceptual level (Creswell 2012). It is of great utility to the researcher when existing theories do not address the problem at hand and an explanation of a process is needed. Thus, in order to obtain a greater understanding of the concept of mentoring university students with ASD, grounded theory allowed for the development of a mentoring concept for the students with ASD and their mentors, who participated in the Autism Mentorship Initiative (AMI), which we will describe below.

Method

Setting

The AMI is a collaborative program run by the Centre for Students with Disabilities (CSD), the Faculty of Education, and the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University (SFU). The AMI was modeled off of a variety of existing mentorship schemes (AMP at York University; BC Access and Diversity at UBC; SEAD program at University of Connecticut), and involves matching a student with ASD with a neurotypical peer who is either a senior undergraduate student or a graduate student. Each mentee was paired with a mentor over the course of two semesters. Mentees and mentors met weekly for up to 1–2 h per week (on average pairs met 1 h, once per week) to discuss the mentee's learning, communication, and social goals, through individualized guidance and support. At the start of the mentorship, mentors underwent a full day of training, in which they learned about (1) ASD and how it may affect student adjustment to university; (2) mentor position expectations (time commitment, setting appropriate boundaries with mentee); (3) program policies and instructions. Opportunities for direct supervision for the mentors were incorporated into the AMI through monthly supervision meetings attended by the mentors, at least one Clinical Supervisor, the Program Coordinator, and program assistant(s).

In addition, the AMI involved educational workshops and social events offered throughout the year, which were geared towards the mentees but were open to mentors as well. More information about AMI can be found here: <https://www.sfu.ca/students/disabilityaccess/programs-and-services/autism-mentorship-program.html>.

Participants

Participants were university students from SFU that were recruited on a voluntary basis via selective sampling. Mentees ($n=9$; 7 male, 2 female; mean age=21 years, $sd=1.73$, $min=19$, $max=24$) were SFU undergraduate students with a diagnosis of high-functioning ASD. Mentees were registered for accommodations through the CSD, which itself required that students provide documentation confirming their clinical diagnosis. Generally, if this documentation was more than 3 years old, supplemental information was most often provided by having a psychiatrist or registered psychologist complete a psychiatric verification of disability form provided by SFU. Diagnoses were made according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association 1994) or DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association 2013) using at least one of the following diagnostic assessments: the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS™; Lord et al. 2000) and/or the Autism Diagnostic Interview (ADI-R™; Rutter et al. 2003), and/or through psychoeducational assessment or psychological evaluation. See Table 1 (p. 38) for more information. The higher portion of males to females is a reflection of existing ratios in the broader ASD population. Mentees were of various ethnic backgrounds (six Caucasian, one Japanese, one Chinese, and one Sri Lankan), and for one English was not the first language. However, all participants were proficient in speaking and understanding English as a requirement of being a student enrolled at SFU. The number of terms

completed by mentees at SFU at the time of enrolment in the study ranged from 2 (i.e., first-year student) to 12 (i.e., fourth-year student).

Mentors ($n=9$; 1 male, 8 female; mean age=25 years, $sd=3.32$, $min=21$, $max=33$) were senior undergraduate or graduate SFU students recruited from the Faculty of Education and the Department of Psychology. Mentors were required to have some knowledge of either ASD or to have previous mentoring experience. Mentors underwent an interview that assessed their intentions and capabilities as an AMI mentor. Six mentors had experience working with children or adolescents with ASD and the remaining three mentors had previous mentoring experience with neurotypical children, adolescents, or adults. The higher portion of females to males as mentors is a reflection of the female to male ratio in areas of study for Education and Psychology. Mentors were of various ethnic backgrounds and all spoke English fluently (five Caucasian, one Chinese, one Taiwanese, one Middle-eastern, and one Hispanic).

Procedure

Participants gave written informed consent under a protocol approved by the Research Ethics Board of Simon Fraser University. Data collection took place in a quiet room, either at the CSD or in a research lab at SFU. The actual names of mentees and mentors have been replaced by pseudo names in order to protect their privacy.

Interviews

Term 1: unstructured interview with mentors Each mentor was interviewed towards the end of October/beginning of November, 2014. This timeframe was late enough in the semester to give the mentee-mentor pairs time to have a few meetings and experience their involvement with the AMI, yet early enough to assess their experiences during

Table 1 Mentee diagnoses

Mentee	Date of diagnosis	Diagnosis	Comorbid diagnoses
Tom	2011; 2013	AS; ASD	None
Paul	2009	AD	None
Steve	2013	ASD	Genetic generalized epilepsy
Brian	2010	AD	Tourette syndrome, anxiety disorder, mixed learning disability
David	2005; 2014	AD; ASD	Developmental coordination disorder
Sarah	2000	AD	Obsessive compulsive disorder
John	2002	AS	Nonverbal learning disability
Amy	2001; 2014	AD; ASD	None
Chris	2004; 2014	AD; ASD	ADHD combined subtype

AD autistic disorder (DSM-IV), ASD autism spectrum disorder (DSM-5), AS asperger syndrome (DSM-IV), ADHD attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

the start of the program. Note that some pairs had started their mentoring relationship in the AMI before 2014 (see Table 2, p. 39). The interview included questions such as, “How is the program going for you so far?”, and “Describe a meeting with your mentee.” (see Supplementary File 1). Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Term 1: semi-structured interview with mentees Interviews containing semi-structured questions were conducted with the mentees in the beginning of Term 1 in order to obtain further background information from the mentees and to build rapport between the researcher and the mentees (see Supplementary File 2). Establishing rapport within interview settings is vital to the interview process with individuals with ASD (Nirmal 2015). These interviews also allowed the researcher, who was conducting the interview, to assess the mentees’ ability to converse in an interview setting. From these interviews, it was concluded that many of the mentees were capable of providing sufficient answers to semi-structured interview questions and informed decisions were made for how to structure the interview questions in Term 2.

Term 2: Semi-structured interviews with mentors and mentees Mentors (see Supplementary File 3) and mentees (see Supplementary File 4) were interviewed separately in semi-structured one-on-one interviews about their experiences in the AMI. Interviews were adapted by employing both verbal and typewritten methods to reduce the impact of social communication difficulties for individuals with ASD within in-person interviews (Armstrong 2011). For the typewritten form, participants were given a set of questions on a laptop computer and asked to elaborate as much as possible when answering the questions, for which they

were given unlimited time. Sample questions for mentees included, “Is your mentor helping you to work on your goals? If so, how does your mentor help you?” Participants were informed that a verbal discussion would follow their typing session, in order to clarify and/or elaborate on the answers they provided on the computer. These discussions were audiotaped (except for one with a mentee, who did not provide consent to be audiotaped) and transcribed. This protocol was used for both mentees and mentors.

Program Evaluation Surveys

Both mentees and mentors filled out Program Evaluation Surveys at the end of Term 2. These surveys were used to supplement and further clarify responses made within the interviews. In total, just over half of the mentees (n=5) and mentors (n=5) completed the surveys. The surveys were given after the program had terminated for the year, which may explain the lack of response from the remaining four mentees and four mentors. While not the focus of the present study, these data can be found in Supplementary File 5 (mentees) and Supplementary File 6 (mentors).

Progress Notes and Goal Setting Forms

Supporting evidence also came from analyzing the progress notes written by the AMI mentors throughout the year. Mentors wrote progress notes each week, which were handed into the program coordinator, in order to summarize the goals, issues, and important discussions between the mentees and their mentors and to track the mentees’ progress in the AMI. These notes were useful to the analysis in that they confirmed the findings from the interviews and surveys.

Goal Setting forms were provided to the mentees at the start of Term 1 (see Supplementary File 7). Mentees filled out these forms with the help of their mentors and the program coordinator of the AMI. These forms included areas addressing academic, social, health and job/career goals that helped mentees to predict the areas in which they would need support at university.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015). In total, there were data from 23 interviews (see Fig. 1), including 7 interviews with mentors in Term 1, 8 interviews with mentors in Term 2, and 8 interviews with mentees in Term 2. The different number of interviews each term was due to one mentor leaving the program after Term 1 and two new mentors starting with their mentees in Term 2. Upon entering the coding stage of grounded theory in Term 1, each interview was carefully

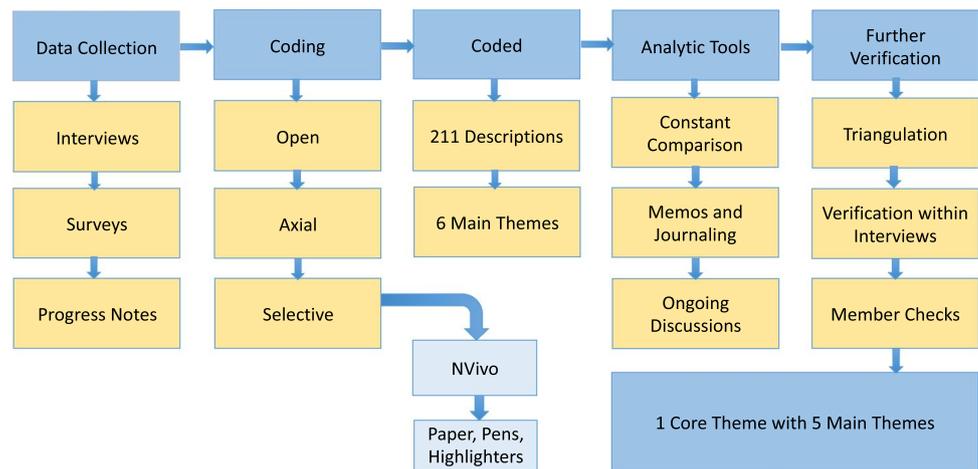
Table 2 Mentoring pairs’ commencement dates

Mentee	Mentor	Mentorship commencement
Tom	Lisa	Fall 2013
Paul	Lisa	Fall 2014
Steve	Susan, Mary	Susan—fall 2013, Mary—spring 2015
Brian	Julie	Spring 2015
David	Megan	Fall 2014
Sarah	Tracey	Fall 2014
John	Anna	Fall 2014
Amy	Michelle	Fall 2014
Chris	Jamie	Fall 2014

Fall semester is term 1: September–December

Spring semester is term 2: January–April

Fig. 1 Data analysis for the coding of themes



transcribed and analyzed first using an open coding procedure that involved a line-by-line analysis, followed by coding whole sentences and paragraphs. In Term 2, interviews were also carefully transcribed and further open coding and axial coding were applied to the data, followed by selective coding to reach a conceptual level of analysis. Whereas open coding involves breaking apart the data to create categories, axial coding involves relating categories and concepts together, which is the first phase of systematically collapsing data and piecing it back together. Finally, selective coding is the final stage where main themes and concepts emerge to form a conceptual framework. The coding process initially revealed 211 categories or descriptions that were later collapsed, such that six main themes emerged. The analysis was facilitated by NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10 2014). Supplemental analyses were done with highlighters and paper, drawing out diagrams and making connections between categories. Using the constant comparative method, data were compared, codes refined, and categories and themes were developed. Both memos and journals were recorded in order to clarify the analyses and to be cognizant of researcher bias. Data triangulation was conducted between interviews, surveys, and progress notes. Ongoing discussions with AMI supervisors also helped to clarify and verify interpretations. Finally, member checking was conducted with the mentees and mentors within the interviews, to verify their responses. A final member check was given to mentors at the end of Term 2 to verify the theoretical analysis of the core and main themes.

Findings

Five interrelated main themes emerged from our analyses, including ‘The Natural Progression of the Relationship’, ‘The Supportive Mentor’, ‘The Meeting Process’,

‘Identifying and Implementing Goals’ and ‘Learning Together’. These main themes are encompassed within an overarching core theme that we labeled ‘A Mentee-centered Approach’. Each main theme and their sub-themes are described in Table 3 (p. 40). Challenges that impeded the mentorship process were captured during further analysis of the data to support the development of the main themes, and described here under the section ‘Barriers to Providing a Mentee-centered Approach’.

The “Natural Progression” of the Relationship: Being “Open” and “Comfortable”

Mentors and mentees experienced a natural progression of the relationship, in which they became more open and comfortable with each other. Becoming “open” involved both the mentee becoming more open to expressively communicating with his/her mentor, but also the mentor letting the mentee know that he/she was available to discuss various issues that arose. Anna (mentor) explained how her relationship with her mentee (John) evolved over time:

I think with any relationship the more you get to know a person, the more comfortable it feels in terms of what to expect. In the beginning, it was getting to know this new person and getting to know the role that you were in as well...So, I think that natural progression of just being more comfortable and knowing what the other person wants and kind of expects just, it’s helpful.

Julie (mentor) saw the process of her mentee increasingly opening up to her as he became more comfortable with her:

My relationship with my mentee has definitely improved since the start of the program because we have gotten to know each other better and have more

Table 3 The main themes and subthemes of A mentee-centered approach (core theme)

Main themes	Sub-themes
The natural progression of the relationship	The self-advocating mentee Relaxing the structure Enjoying time together Being on the right level: not a hierarchy Setting and maintaining boundaries
The supportive mentor	A familiar supportive connection Being a guide and a friend
The meeting process	Same time, same place Check-ins, follow-ups, and sign-offs Being on the same page An implicit interaction in itself
Identifying and implementing goals	Goal domains Hierarchy of goals Macro and micro goals
Learning together	University adjustment Creating cohesion and collaboration

trust in our relationship. He is more open to me than when we first met, and even sometimes asks for help, when previously he was reluctant to share such information.

The subtheme, the *self-advocating mentee*, reflects that as time progressed, the mentee showed an increase in expressive communication and, therefore, active participation in the mentorship. The mentee role involved a continuum between being active and passive, such that some mentees started as more passive and developed an active role at a slower rate than others. The passive mentee was one who looked to the mentor more to help assist him or her to decide which goals to work on. The active mentee, on the other hand, took the initiative to engage the mentor in discussion and goal setting. The active role of the mentee meant that the mentor took a more passive approach, such as when Michelle mentioned how she would just “sit and...listen” to her mentee, Amy, discuss her own progress and explain her goals. Amy (mentee) discussed how she could go to her mentor, Michelle, with her “game plan” and then Michelle would give her advice on her plan. Michelle discussed how Amy began to take more control of her decisions at university, as time progressed in AMI, stating how Amy had progressed from Term 1 to Term 2,

She currently has things under control for the most part and I feel as though I’m there more as a ‘just in case’ something comes up or to hear about her week and point out or suggest things which she could do which may be helpful for her.

The natural progression of the relationship also involved *relaxing the structure* of the interactions

between mentoring pairs, and by the pairs *enjoying their time together*. Relaxing the structure related to how the meetings between mentees and mentors started out as structured and mentor-led. However, as relationships developed, the meetings became less structured and more mentee-led, which provided “more opportunities for the mentees to speak up” (Mary, mentor). In this particular study, relaxing the structure meant loosening the structure and formality of the relationships so that interactions became more relaxed and comfortable. Lisa (mentor) explains how relaxing the structure of the meetings with her mentee, Paul, had been a positive experience:

When we first started...things were very structured, things were very goal-oriented. I would come in with a plan and we would kind of address the plan. We had fairly set ways of addressing goals...we made goals, broke down the goals, we tracked the goals, and like all that kind of stuff, and that was good...That was necessary at the beginning...But now we just touch in on the goals and we have a conversation about the goals and we kind of, like, you know, we just, kind of talk... And now we kind of have a mentorship relationship where we can kind of check in about issues in a more open way I think. So, that’s been good...we kind of released all the structure.

Enjoying time together involved getting to know one another and sharing in each other’s interests and/or disclosing interests with one another to help foster these relationships. Developing peer-like interactions was aided by enjoyment within the relationship, making the meetings feel “less stiff” (Michelle, mentor). In turn, this enjoyment led to further strengthening of the relationship. Lisa

(mentor) expressed how she and her mentee, Tom, had fun together when they met: “We laugh a lot.”

As mentees became more open, relationships also became less one-sided, creating a more balanced, peer-like interaction. Within the mentoring relationships, mentors made attempts to make the mentee feel that they were on the same level, and not “above” them in any authoritative way. *Being on the right level* involved finding a balance between “authority” and “comradery” to develop “a form of peer-education” (Julie, mentor) within AMI.

However, providing a setting in which the mentees felt comfortable enough to disclose their ideas and opinions on goals was achieved by striking a balance between being open, on the one hand, and professional, on the other. That is, as mentees and mentors became more open with one another, *setting and maintaining boundaries* of the relationship ensured a degree of professionalism. Setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries in the relationship was emphasized to some extent in the mentor training (i.e., mentors were advised to avoid entering a romantic relationship with their mentee, and were encouraged to set clear expectations on when they could be reached by their mentee, etc.), and so it was perhaps not surprising that this emerged as important to the relationship. However, a novel finding was that setting these boundaries actually helped make the relationship more comfortable, and encouraged mentees to open up to their mentors. For instance, Lisa (mentor) felt that setting these initial boundaries with both of her mentees, Tom and Paul, made their relationships more comfortable from the start. Lisa sensed that her mentees needed these boundaries to be very clear in order for them to feel comfortable around her, which opened up lines of communication between them:

I perceive that setting boundaries makes certain things less stressful, for that student, because there’s just clear guidelines. Whether it’s like text messages are only for emergency situations or, you know, those kinds of boundaries. Like being very clear about it kind of cuts away, I think, a certain amount of stress and leaves open for a little bit freer communication.

The Supportive Mentor: Being a “Guide” and a “Friend”

Mentors had to be supportive and flexible in order to appropriately assist mentees with their various needs, and help the mentee to achieve what was important to him/her. Brian (mentee) described this versatility quite well:

The role of an AMI mentor is to put his/her mentee in the correct path and help the mentee in achieving his/her vision and goals in life. The responsibilities of an AMI mentor, is to be understanding, empathetic,

punctual, flexible, professional, on time, well organized and most of all passionate, dedicated, and willing to learn new things alongside his/her mentee.

As part of this overarching theme, mentors provided a *familiar supportive connection* for the mentee to rely upon for academic and social support. The mentor provided a consistent and reliable resource for the mentees, by keeping in regular contact with the mentees, helping them with any difficulties that they faced at university. Tom explained it was an interaction “that would otherwise be non-existent if I was to be left to my own devices.” Sarah (mentee) agreed that this connection was valuable in supporting her at university as well. She explained,

Just kind of knowing like if there’s anything that I need help with. I have somewhere to go. I’m not just wandering lost.

In addition, mentees felt that having an understanding of ASD was a great asset for mentors in AMI. Amy (mentee) said,

I think it’s just helpful to have mentors that kind of understand that they’re dealing with people with autism. I think, other programs you know, I’d have to tell my mentor hey this is what I’m like but they may not know what that is or understand how to deal with people who have [ASD].

Being a familiar supportive connection also involved the mentor *being a guide and a friend* to the mentee. Lisa’s mentee, Tom, put it best when he described what an AMI mentor was to him:

I guess kind of a combination of friend, a peer, and a teacher. A peer in that we aren’t very far apart in age, a friend in that I feel comfortable talking to [Lisa] and we seem to have similar interests, and a teacher in that [she is] able to provide insights that I would not have thought of which are new and useful.

Even mentors had the perception that they were “...like a guide in helping the mentees with the various aspects of university life” (Megan, mentor). One mentor, Jamie, said:

I see the mentor’s role as more of a friend and a guide—someone he can always turn to with problems or questions he is experiencing about any topic.

The Meeting Process

The meeting process allowed for structure to be incorporated into the meetings, which was key to initiating momentum in the mentoring relationship. Mentors and mentees usually met at the *same time and same place* in order to provide consistency for meeting. The meetings

typically involved *check-ins, follow-ups, and signs-offs* such as checking in on events and relevant issues that the mentee experienced over the past week, following up on goals, and signing off by discussing the next steps for goals and confirming the next meeting time. Meetings were most successful if both mentee and mentor were on the *same page*, such that the mentors and mentees agreed and accepted each other's input on goals.

He wanted to learn skills for better communication, and various ways in which he could meet new people. I was on the same page in terms of what goals I felt that he should work on. His academic progress was very good, we did go over a couple of time management and planning skills and I thought that was an area that he could set goals in and try to achieve as well (Anna, mentor)

It was not necessary for every goal to be explicitly taught, as participating in the mentorship relationship allowed mentees to practise both social and time management skills. That is, by meeting on time each week and interacting with their mentors, the mentoring relationship was an *implicit interaction in itself*.

I'm not someone who's trained in social skills interventions or that's not the point of our program obviously but even just you know, meeting for half an hour or an hour each week is a social interaction in itself regardless of what we talk about which, given what he really wants to work on, I think is important. So, I certainly see that so hopefully he sees that as well, the usefulness of that (Jamie, mentor)

I taught him something about like being punctual. So...I'm not sure if he will do this in the future, but he's very punctual to our meetings, so I'm assuming he's taking this message (Mary, mentor).

Identifying and Implementing Goals

The types of goals addressed in AMI fell into four broad *goal domains* (i.e. academic, job/career, social, and emotional). The consensus from the interviews with mentees and mentors was that academic goals were addressed first, and then social goals were addressed once the mentee felt he/she was performing better academically. Thus, there was often a clear *hierarchy of goals*, tailored to the specific needs of the mentee. For instance, even though Anna and John had spent a great deal of their time working on social goals, John stated that working on academic goals was still his priority in AMI. John said simply, "Yeah, out of what percent it's most helpful, it's like academic and then social." It seemed as though, even if the mentees placed great importance upon working on social goals on their

Goal Setting form (i.e. "Very Important" or "Somewhat Important"), as Amy had done, if they were struggling at all academically, academic goals still had to be the first focus. Once academics were being managed, this freed up the time to turn the focus to social goals. Megan (mentor) discussed the hierarchy of goals that she experienced with her mentee, David. Megan said,

My mentee's main goal was to make sure his grades did not drop from high school to university, mainly by improving on planning and scheduling of study time. While the social aspect of university was not as important to my mentee in the beginning of the year, now that he is starting to manage his classes, he seems more open to engaging in social activities.

Mentors and mentees discussed how the *macro goals* of the mentee that were stated on the Goal Setting form had evolved and changed over time into *micro goals* as the mentee experienced university. Macro goals were broad goals (e.g., time management) that were predicted from the start of program, which gave the mentor a starting point to support mentees. Mentors worked with mentees to break down macro goals into micro goals, which became more specific to the mentee. Tracey (mentor) explained,

Well in the beginning I asked her what her goal was and her goal was just to like improve time management and so we discuss how she can do that. And so we try to [...] break down into micro goals I guess you could say.... So we just break it down into little things she wanted to work on and do in order to improve because we started off saying [...] if you do this, do you think this would help your progress?

Learning Together

Throughout the mentorship process, mentors and mentees were Learning Together. Mentors learned about how to work with adults with ASD and how to be a mentor; mentees learned about the university experience and that many of their challenges were common to most others in post-secondary settings. Importantly, mentees learned that *university adjustment* is an ongoing process, as Tom (mentee) put it: "It's kind of a gradual thing". Another mentee, John, said,

I think the purpose [of AMI] is to help autistic students learn strategies so that they can adapt better to SFU. It's not unusual for autistic students to have trouble doing work, and moving to an entirely new community can be really intimidating.

Many of the challenges faced by the mentees were common experiences shared by neurotypical students. Thus,

mentors used their own experiences and knowledge as university students to relate to the mentees and to let them know that the challenges and stress they were facing were part of being a university student and not specific to their diagnosis of ASD. Mentors “normalized” the experiences of the mentees by letting them know they weren’t the only students who felt stressed and overwhelmed by competing academic demands, the many changes in scheduling and classes, and the difficulties in making social connections. John (mentee) explained,

I think socially just having that support system and having that someone to talk to is really important in helping them adjust to university especially sort of learning from someone who’s gone through the same thing, because adjusting to university is hard for everyone, I mean, regardless of diagnosis.

In order for the mentors to best support the mentees and understand their needs as both a university student and a student with ASD, they received training and collaborated with other mentors and the AMI clinicians and team members. *Creating cohesion and collaboration* was essential within the mentor training and ultimately gave the mentors the confidence to support the mentees. Part of this cohesion and collaboration involved having a strong support network:

I mean one of the strengths is really the positive and supportive environment that’s been created in our supervision meetings and even our initial meeting at the beginning of the year even before we were matched with mentees. I definitely feel like I know if I ever have any issue or problem there’ll be several people at my disposal that I can call upon. So I do feel, the level of support, I think is one of the strengths of this program (Jamie, mentor).

Core Theme: A Mentee-centered Approach: “An Individualized Mentoring Program”

Taken together, the five main themes fed into a core theme, which refer to as a *Mentee-centered Approach*. This was a holistic, person-centered, semi-structured approach that focused on the mentee’s individual needs. For the mentor, this approach involved a combination of getting to know the mentee and getting to know the mentee’s goals. For the mentee, it involved identifying and communicating his or her goals. As described by the main themes, a Mentee-centered Approach emerged out of the process of developing an open and comfortable relationship between mentee and mentor and relaxing the structure of the meetings. In turn, the mentees themselves became more open and communicative which

led to self-advocacy for the mentees as they took a more active role in the mentoring process. Through a natural progression of the relationship, mentor–mentee meetings became less formal and structured, incorporating friendly elements into the relationships while still maintaining the right level of professionalism and setting boundaries to clarify roles, which allowed for more disclosure by the mentee, and allowed the mentor to provide individually-tailored (i.e., mentee-centered) support.

Mentors and mentees reported feeling that AMI was geared towards providing support that was specific to the mentee. If the mentee needed to work on a goal, and he/she could communicate this to their mentor, then this is what the pair worked on. The success of this communication came from building rapport together, in providing the mentee with a comfortable atmosphere in which to disclose his/her personal information, concerns, and questions around goals. Mentees who struggled with communication difficulties were encouraged by the mentors to communicate and self-advocate more as the mentor would scaffold the process of determining and working on goals.

Jamie (mentor) understood that AMI was a person-centered approach that involved the mentor helping the mentee to identify and work on goals. He said,

It really depends on the individual right? It’s like, whatever problems they’re having, and having the mentor kind of work with them and troubleshoot those problems as they arise [...]. It’s not a structured program. It’s an individualized mentoring program. It’s catered toward helping each individual with whatever specific needs they have.

The mentee’s self-advocacy developed from the scaffold of the mentor and through building a closer and more open relationship. This generated a more active role for the mentee in AMI, which led to the mentor taking a more passive role on the “sidelines” (Michelle, mentor). Each mentee began the program needing different levels of support, some needing more support than others, and this differentiated process continued throughout the AMI. One mentee, Brian, recognized this fact, saying, “Everyone needs different levels of support” in AMI. The support and flexibility of the mentors aided this process as they were willing to help the mentees with a variety of issues. Mary (mentor) also acknowledged how the Mentee-centered Approach meant the mentor had to be flexible in her role in order to more specifically address her mentee’s needs and the importance of having that flexible structure:

I feel there is a lot of flexibility for the mentor in this program. We don’t really have very structured

rules and goals that a mentor needs to practice and achieve. In a way, I like it because it allows me to prepare according to my mentee's needs, and I won't be pressured to meet some behavioral goals as a mentor.

Meeting the needs of their mentees was the ultimate goal for the mentors. To best achieve this, mentors felt they had to tailor the mentoring process according to what each individual mentee needed in terms of support. The mentees specified the goals for which their mentors could help them to better adjust to university in various ways. As time progressed and relationships developed, mentees and mentors worked together to achieve these goals. Mary (mentor) simply said it best, "With my mentee I feel, what he thinks, what he needs, is really the core part."

Barriers to Providing a Mentee-Centered Approach

In some cases, mentors struggled to provide effective mentoring strategies; mentees struggled to feel supported; and mentors and mentees, together, struggled in developing their relationships. There were three relationships, in particular, which broke down. Two of these relationships managed to overcome many of their difficulties, and one could not be redeemed after the challenges experienced between the mentee and the mentor. Barriers included not knowing how to first approach the relationship (e.g., the mentor acting with too much authority to start), not realizing the importance of getting to know one another and building rapport (i.e., through interest-sharing), and not being on the same page (e.g., different ideas on goals or lack of investment in the mentorship). Such barriers made it difficult to develop an open and comfortable relationship and, therefore, a Mentee-centered Approach.

One mentoring pair, in particular, had a relationship that slowly dissolved over the two terms, eventually leading to termination of their mentoring meetings. The mentor, Jamie, and the mentee, Chris, started their relationship with many challenges. Both struggled to get to know one another and understand how to best work on goals together. Over time, their relationship began to move into a somewhat more positive direction, albeit, not enough to sustain their relationship. Their meetings became fewer and fewer as time went along until, in Term 2, they were no longer meeting face-to-face anymore. Jamie reports feeling like their relationship felt cold and uncomfortable and this, for them, had led to negative feelings between them. Jamie (mentor) said,

I would like our relationship to move towards a more friendly and less professional relationship as our meetings still seem cold, formal and impersonal. He seems slightly more comfortable with me than he

used to, but our meetings do not seem relaxing or enjoyable to him. Frankly, I question whether he likes me at all. I am not saying this to feel sorry for myself. It is more a concern that this has been a barrier to a beneficial relationship.

Another mentoring pair, Susan and Steve, did not develop as friendly a relationship as other pairs due to setting the mentor's role on a level that was too high. Susan explains why she felt this had occurred, in part because of the emphasis on setting boundaries during mentor training:

I also feel like there is a hierarchy. I mean, there's schedules, checking in, how are you doing with school, personal admin stuff. And then there's spending time together, getting to know each other, investing in them as a person. But then there was a lot of emphasis placed on boundaries in the [initial] training meeting. This emphasis really made me feel like we were separate and emphasized the fact that the mentees had a diagnosis and we didn't. I think with a different orientation approach we may be able to change this way of thinking so that we are more able to be "friends" and it could take away much of the hierarchy in the relationship.

While overall, Brian (mentee) saw his relationship with Julie (mentor) positively, when asked if there were characteristics about his mentor that he felt were a barrier to relating to one another. Brian said,

Though AMI is already very good, if there were more male mentors it would be better since sometimes mentees may need someone of the same gender in order to relate, find more common ground and connect with better.

General Discussion

The goal of the current study was to develop understandings around the process of mentoring university students with ASD, based on the experiences of both mentees and mentors within a specific mentoring scheme at SFU. An in-depth analysis of participant interviews and other data sources was afforded by a grounded theory approach. Rather than analyzing the outcomes of our mentoring program (AMI), we focused on identifying the components that constituted the mentoring experience. The analysis revealed a core theme, A Mentee-centered Approach, as well as five inter-related main themes.

While this is the first study to present a qualitative analysis of mentoring students with ASD, it may be helpful to situate our findings in the broader literature on mentorship. For instance, Nora and Crisp (2007) emphasized four

major domains that comprise the mentoring concept within the college context: psychological/emotional support (e.g., sense of listening, providing moral support, establishing a supportive relationship), support for setting goals and choosing a career path (e.g., assessing the mentee's strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, providing assistance with setting academic and career goals), academic subject knowledge support (e.g., advancing student's knowledge relevant to their chosen field), and specification of a role model (e.g., the ability of the mentee to learn from the mentor's past and present actions, achievements, and failures). While these variables emerged from examining a wide variety of mentoring relationships (i.e., students may have received mentorship from a parent, faculty, counselor, spouse, or friend), we note some important similarities and differences between these variables and the themes that emerged from our study of peer mentorship. First, similar to Nora and Crisp's (2007) variable, psychological/emotional support, the establishment of a Mentee-centered Approach relied on pairs developing an open and comfortable relationship, one in which mentees felt supported and heard. Indeed, we found that this relationship was critical in order for mentees to feel comfortable enough to communicate their needs to their mentors, and in doing so becoming self-advocates within the mentorship experience. Like Nora and Crisp's (2007) support for setting goals and choosing a career path, participants in AMI identified the importance of setting academic goals, with most pairs placing these at the top of their hierarchy of goals. While some pairs focused also on job/career goals, a broader focus on career paths was not commonly seen in our sample. We suspect that this may be because the students with ASD often have limited insight into their own strengths (Van-Bergeijk et al. 2008), little-to-no job experience (Howlin 2000), difficulty with executive functions such as planning (Lopez et al. 2005), and few support services around career development (Müller et al. 2008; see; Hendricks 2010 for a review). Thus, when compared with neurotypical students, students with ASD are relatively inexperienced in the job market, and so discussions under job/career goals typically focused on getting a job for the first time, rather than planning out a longer-term career path. Finally, as in Nora and Crisp's (2007) specification of a role model variable, mentors in AMI identified the importance of normalizing the university experience for mentees by discussing their own successes and failures as students.

In contrast, we did not find any themes around mentors providing academic subject knowledge support to their mentees. While academic goals were emphasized in AMI, these tended to focus around issues of time management, balancing workload, prioritizing assignments, and communicating with professors and TAs, rather than content-specific support. One clear reason for this is that mentees/

mentors were not matched on academic background, as most mentors came from Education and Psychology, whereas mentees came from a variety of academic programs. Another explanation is that the role of mentor-as-tutor was not emphasized in the mentor training; rather, mentors were instructed to provide more general supports around teaching effective study skills. Future research may consider incorporating academic subject knowledge support into mentoring relationships with students with ASD.

Self-Advocacy and its Role Within the Mentee-Centered Approach

A finding that we would like to highlight, here, is that in order to provide a Mentee-centered Approach, the mentees had to learn to self-advocate. The self-advocating mentee in the current study was one who learned to express and share his/her ideas; and to communicate with his/her mentor within the mentorship meetings. In our study, we found a reciprocal relationship between these two themes: just as self-advocacy was needed for a Mentee-centered Approach to emerge, a Mentee-centered Approach was essential for promoting self-advocacy in the mentee. The importance of self-advocacy for university students with ASD has been noted before. Hurley (2014) conducted qualitative interviews with college students with ASD to explore their perceptions on adjustment to college and the types of supports they used to help them adjust. She found that the key factors to their adjustment were awareness and acceptance of the diagnosis, self-advocacy skills, and use of mentor support. Furthermore, Test et al.'s (2005) conceptual framework for self-advocacy of students with disabilities within the public education system relates well with our finding that the mentees became open and active participants in the mentorship process during their time spent at university. Their framework, as it relates to all levels of education including post-secondary, involved first knowing one's own strengths and learning style, and knowing one's rights as a student with a disability. The component that follows these previous components, and is very pertinent to the present study, is communication. The authors state "Learning how to communicate information effectively with others through negotiation, assertiveness, and problem solving in individual and group situations is critical to self-advocacy" (Test et al. 2005, p. 45). The same held true for the mentees in the present study, who developed self-advocacy within the mentorship as they became more expressive and communicative when discussing goals and problem solving with their mentors.

Implications and Future Directions

Based on our findings, we can offer specific recommendations to others who are designing peer-mentoring programs for students with ASD, as well as ideas for how to improve our own. First, a key finding was that developing an open and comfortable relationship was critical for the Mentee-centered Approach, in that it facilitated the process of mentees communicating their needs to their mentors, thereby self-advocating within the mentoring relationship. While we found that this tended to develop naturally over time, we suggest that peer-mentoring programs explicitly emphasize the importance of establishing a comfortable relationship, and encourage mentors to build in time for getting to know their mentee. Another area that contributed to the natural progression of the relationship was when mentees and mentors enjoyed their time together. It may be helpful for program coordinators to think of ways to enhance the social aspects of mentoring. We hosted social events for mentors and mentees (e.g., a games night, a movie night), but they were not attended by all mentees (approximately half the mentees attended an event throughout the year, yet those who attended reported enjoying the events). Efforts should be made to find ways of encouraging participation in social activities, and to design activities and events that are attractive to both mentees and mentors.

A second recommendation is around setting boundaries and hierarchies within the mentoring relationship. While we emphasized the importance of setting boundaries during the initial mentor training, a few mentors commented that this emphasis may have hindered the development of a friendly relationship with their mentees. We will be using this feedback to refine our training protocol, and we recommend that program designers have more nuanced discussions emphasizing the balance between boundary setting and fostering an open and comfortable relationship between mentors and mentees. While boundaries were helpful, in that they provided clear guidelines as to the nature of the mentoring relationship (and ensured the safety of participants), boundaries that were interpreted too rigidly or that established a hierarchy between mentor and mentee were detrimental to fostering an open and comfortable relationship (and a Mentee-centered Approach).

We suggest that future research examine how the matching of mentee and mentor impacts relationship building. While this was not the focus of the present study, there were a handful of pairs that were not successful in building an open and comfortable relationship that was central to the Mentee-centered Approach. The descriptions that emerged within the Barriers to Providing a Mentee-centered Approach indicated that issues arose around hierarchies, enjoying time together and building rapport, and differences in ideas on goals. However, the role of matching

was unexplored, and we suspect that there may be important factors to consider such as gender, ethnic background, personality, and interests (e.g., hobbies, academic interests) that could have impacted the success of mentoring relationships.

Limitations

A main goal of the present study was to give voice to university students with ASD, a population that has been, for too long, understudied and underestimated. However, despite our best efforts, much of the dialogue came from mentors. While the mentees did learn to be more open and communicative with their own mentors, they showed more difficulty with communicating and elaborating on concepts, such as the development of relationships, than their mentors did within the interviewing process. To this end, mentees tended to provide thinner responses to interview questions. While there was much effort and varied technique provided for the interview structure in order to encourage further elaboration from mentees, about half of the mentees had difficulty with expressing their ideas enough to gain the same richness as was seen with the mentors. This was not surprising, given that even very high functioning individuals with ASD, have social communication difficulties (Landa et al. 2000; Adreon and Durocher 2007). Despite this limitation, we hope that mentoring programs, such as the one we describe here, will have positive impacts on the ability of individuals with ASD to elaborate on their thoughts and experiences, and to thrive, within the university context.

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