

Cultures of Mentorship: A Qualitative Investigation of Peer Mentorship During High School in
the US and Japan

by

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CULTURES OF MENTORSHIP: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF
PEER MENTORSHIP DURING HIGH SCHOOL IN THE US AND JAPAN

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Abstract

Despite the known benefits of mentorship, little is known about informal peer mentoring relationships in the high school context, and even less is known about how those relationships manifest in different cultures. This qualitative study sought to shed light on this topic by administering a survey designed to tap key concepts related to informal peer mentorship in high school to fourteen participants, seven in the US and seven in Japan. Themes relating to instrumentality/socio-emotionality, responsibility, hierarchy, and benefits from these relationships in each sample are discussed, as well as cultural differences and similarities in how these concepts emerge. Japanese participants described relationships that were consistently instrumental or socio-emotional, while American participants often had relationships that shifted between these categories. Regardless of country of origin, most participants preferred to describe their relationships as egalitarian. Responsibilities differed based on the perceived social role of the participant and their mentor within each cultural context. Participants in both samples described a variety of benefits derived from their mentorships. Implications and future directions for this line of research are discussed.

Cultures of Mentorship: A Qualitative Investigation of Peer Mentorship During High School in the US and Japan

High school is a time of enormous change, full of self-discovery, learning, and growth but rife with academic challenges and social pressures. One way that high school students manage to succeed is with the guidance of a mentor. Sometimes this mentor is a teacher, family member, community leader, or other adult. Other times, however, peers take on the role of mentor. While there has been research conducted on the concept of peer mentorship, mostly in a Western context (Cavell et al., 2018; Erickson et al., 2009; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Miranda-Chan et al., 2016), very few studies have examined cultural differences in these types of relationships. The present study is intended to begin to fill this gap by comparing conceptions of informal peer mentorship in the US and Japan. These two countries differ on a variety of key cultural and social norms, and in particular, the nature of the Japanese senpai-kouhai relationship provides us with an example of a mentorship paradigm very different from the Western conception of mentorship. Senpai and kouhai are words that roughly translate into English as "senior" and "junior," but carry far more weight in their original language. Senpai, people who are above you in grade level at the same school or senior members of the same company, are respected and treated with a level of deference by their kouhai, and in return are expected to guide their kouhai and set a good example for them. This relationship is not one enforced by any organization or program, and therefore most closely mirrors the concept of informal mentorship (Erickson et al., 2009) or naturally occurring mentorship in the West (Darling et al., 2002; Miranda-Chan et al., 2016). While some studies on such relationships have included peers in their analysis (Darling et al., 2002), very little research has been devoted to informal peer mentorship. The current study investigates informal peer mentorship in the US and Japan in

order to ascertain the nature of these relationships and their associated outcomes in both cultures. The goal of this research is to fill the gap in psychological literature regarding differences in peer mentorship between the US and Japan by investigating the often overlooked senpai-kouhai relationship both within its cultural context, and how it compares to similar American relationships.

Peer Mentorship and Sociocultural Theory

Whether it's in aiding with schoolwork, extracurriculars, or navigating the social labyrinth that is high school, mentors can teach their mentees important skills, and peer mentors are no exception. Learning from older peers is considered an important part of development in the tradition stemming from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and it is in this framework that the function of peer mentors can be best illustrated.

Sociocultural theory, briefly summarized, describes how children develop by learning and problem solving with the guidance of adults or in collaboration with older or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). These children internalize the tools they were taught and teach them to their successors. Much of the research that has followed in Vygotsky's footsteps focuses on how adults, most often parents, pass on cultural beliefs to children. Chao (1995) is a powerful example of this phenomenon, examining how American and Chinese mothers emphasize important aspects of their cultures in their childrearing, instilling certain values in their children. While not as commonly studied as parents, peers are also a subject of interest; Vygotsky (1978) wrote about how play among peers facilitates learning, and Rogoff (1995) discusses how play, collaboration, and shared thinking can result in higher accomplishment in children than they could achieve individually. Peer mentorship is a powerful example of how such collaboration can

take place, as these relationships are often formed expressly to help one or more of the parties in the relationship learn or become more proficient at something.

Mentorship, simply defined, is when an older or more experienced person takes someone younger or less experienced under their wing and teaches them. This can be within the realm of academics, athletics, music, other hobbies, and so on. Within a sociocultural framework, there is hardly a better relationship (perhaps outside of parenthood) to understand how knowledge is passed down. Previous scholars in both the West (Andersen & Watkins, 2018) and Japan (Sakamoto & Tamanyu, 2014) have noted the congruence between peer mentorship, and sociocultural theory as a whole, and the *senpai-kouhai* relationship has been used in prior research as a way to conceptualize the succession of knowledge both among young children (Saito, 1969) and college students (Yamada, 2012) alike. These two bodies of literature appear to have remained quite separate despite their congruence, and it is this gap that the current study seeks to fill. While programs that pair up older and younger students are often how peer mentorship is understood in the West, the presence of the *senpai-kouhai* relationship and other forms of informal mentorship tells us that this is not the only way that peer mentorship occurs. Naturally occurring mentorship (Darling et al., 2002) or informal mentorship (Erickson et al., 2009), is characterized by guidance from an older or more experienced person with no formal agreement or organizational structure scaffolding the relationship. These relationships have been associated with positive outcomes such as higher academic achievement and better psychological well-being (Erickson et al., 2009; Miranda-Chan et al., 2016).

Few studies have expressly focused on peer mentorship and even fewer on informal peer mentorship. Peer mentorship in the West is most often studied within professional (DeForge et al., 2019; Fisher & Stanyer, 2018; Kram & Isabella, 1985), college (Graham & McClain, 2019)

or, and perhaps most often, within academia (Cree-Green et al., 2020; Lalani et al., 2018; Lewinski et al., 2017; MacKinnon & Shepley, 2014; Scott & Miller, 2017). Several of these studies do reference informal peer mentorship (Cree-Green et al., 2020; MacKinnon & Shepley, 2014), illustrating that while perhaps under-researched, this is a recognized and important phenomenon. Interestingly, Cree-Green et al. (2020) describe the need for more informal peer mentorship because they believe it lacks the hierarchical structure that program-style mentorships do. Contextualized within academia where peers are often people from different institutions, this helps illustrate how peer mentorship might be perceived in a horizontal society, although other researchers disagree on the value of hierarchy (Halevy et al., 2011). While these studies present valuable research, high school is another time where mentorship is badly needed, and research on this topic is scarce.

The few studies that do delve into high school peer mentorship often focus on specific communities or programs, frequently showing how beneficial peer mentors can be. Hacking et al. (2019) investigated a program where HIV-positive youth in South Africa were connected to peer mentors via cell phone and found positive outcomes related to seeking care. Nguyen et al. (2020) found that peer mentors were powerful in facilitating positive experiences in programs intended to aid students with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) in the transition between high school and beyond. Once again, this research is important and very valuable and additionally tells us that peer mentorship is effective for high school students. Mentorship programs, however, are not a corollary to the organic nature of the senpai-kouhai relationship, and it is clear that informal mentorship in high school is a gap in the literature.

The Senpai-Kouhai Relationship

The senpai-kouhai relationship begins as early as elementary school and persists through college into the workplace. It is often conceptualized as a part of a broader “vertical society” in Japan, in which the concept of hierarchical relations “is not that of horizontal stratification by class or caste, but vertical stratification by institution or group of institutions.” (Nakane, 1972). In other words, when outside of work or class one is defined more by the status of their company or school than the status of their role within it, which is only salient when around others from the same institution. This stands in contrast to the American idea of social hierarchy, in which a student might be defined by their position as a sophomore in high school, and not as a student in a particular high school. For example, a 10th grader in Japan would refer to an 11th grader at their own high school as a senpai but would be unlikely to do so with an 11th grader from another school.

The senpai-kouhai relationship has some corollaries in other East Asian countries: seonbae and hubae in Korea, and a variety of differing senior-junior relationships in the different regions and languages of China (e.g., qiánbèi/hòubèi). If these words look similar, it’s because the root of both “senpai” and “seonbae” comes from Chinese languages; the Chinese characters for the word (kanji, hanzi, or hanja in Japanese, Mandarin, and Korean, respectively) are the same in all three countries, “先輩.” These words have evolved different meanings in each country to match the different relationships that these corollaries function as, but are all representative of relationships between seniors and juniors involving trust, responsibility, and formality (Qie et al., 2019). The senpai-kouhai relationship as it currently exists in Japan is a result of a mixture of influences, including Confucian values, the Japanese family system, or *ie*, and the traditional

Japanese education system. As far back as the Tokugawa period (1603-1867 c.e.), we have a record of age-based hierarchies being strictly enforced in Japanese schools:

When you are together in the lecture halls, even if there are only two or three of you, never break the principle of seating by age precedence. If you do the younger will feel uncomfortable or arrogantly proud. At the daimyo's court, rank is all-important and the inferior may not vie with the superior. But in learning seniority is important, and the essential thing is to respect the proper relations of elder and younger. (Dore, 1965, p. 184)

This is a notable factor in the conception of Japan as a vertical society; regardless of your rank in society as a whole, ranks that were very real in this period, seniority was the rule of the school as an institution, and thus superseded rank.

This relationship has remained an important part of Japanese life to this day and guides day-to-day interactions in Japanese schools and companies. A quote from a Japanese student illustrates the modern dynamic of this relationship, "If a senpai says 'morning', we're supposed to answer politely with 'good morning' - if a senpai says 'bye' in a casual way, we're supposed to say 'goodbye.'" (Kristof, 1995) In a qualitative study consisting of 10 interviews with Japanese participants in Beppu Prefecture, Shin (2004) found that senpai/kouhai status impacted the way that participants spoke, with kouhai using desu/masu form (a more formal speech pattern) while addressing their senpai.

If the senpai-kouhai relationship were just a function of politeness and hierarchy, it would not make a good example of an informal peer mentorship relationship. In fact, the senpai-kouhai relationship places a great emphasis on a form of reciprocity, where kouhai have a responsibility to be respectful and emulate, and senpai are meant to take responsibility, provide an example and lead. This effect is especially pronounced in afterschool activities such as sports clubs. Rohlen

(1994) provides an illustrative example in which a senpai took money from a kouhai in their fencing club, and was punished and made to formally apologize not just because of the money, but because it was their role to provide a positive example. The club captain, another senpai who did not take any money, also takes full responsibility and states that he let his kouhai down and should have to personally return all of the money to him! This demonstrates how seriously the influential role of the senpai is taken; a senpai is expected to guide their kouhai, and when they fail, there are serious social repercussions.

Much of the existing literature on the senpai-kouhai relationship is in education, linguistic, or business research. As such, there is a gap in how well it is understood from a psychological perspective. Japanese language studies form the bulk of the psychological literature on this phenomenon, and often focus on the function that senpai serve to pass on knowledge throughout generations in a given community, such as a seminar (Yamada, 2012) or even an experimental group (Saito, 1969). Other studies have shown that this relationship is incredibly important; junior high and high school students in Japan identified it as the most important relationship they had (Ono & Shoji, 2015), but little attention has been paid to it within the English language psychology literature.

Mentorship Across Culture

While prior cross-cultural research on mentorship is scarce, what does exist provides scaffolding for the current study. In one particularly informative paper on mentorship in the US and Japan, Darling et al. (2002) investigated naturally occurring mentorship in the US and Japan. However, this study asked college students to name ten people who were highly influential before college, including parents and other family members along with teachers as possible mentors. As expected, they found that parents were most often named as influential people in

both countries, however, Japanese participants named “more than twice as many peers on average as did participants in the United States (3.79 vs. 1.45)” (Darling et al., 2002). While they could not determine in their data whether or not these named peers were senpai, the prevalence of peers as named influential people suggests that peer mentorship is highly salient in Japan, which warrants further investigation.

The Current Study

As illustrated in the sections above, there is a lack of research on both the senpai-kouhai relationship and informal peer mentorship as a whole. The current study is intended to bridge this gap. To do this, we have identified three specific domains that may be important factors in mentoring relationships across both samples: hierarchy, responsibility, and instrumentality. Mentorship is often expressly hierarchical, and given that Japanese cultural norms are often considered more conducive to hierarchy (Lebra, 1976; Nakane, 1972; Zhai, 2017; Zhang et al., 2005), it stands to reason that those who grew up experiencing Japanese culture would be more oriented towards hierarchical relationships. While peers are often thought of as equals in the hierarchy, Japanese participants may identify their relationships as being less egalitarian than Americans.

It is clear from the cultural norms surrounding the senpai-kouhai relationship, which carries implicit expectations of being a good role model and passing on knowledge for the senpai, and respect for the kouhai (Cave, 2004; LeTendre, 1994; Qie et al., 2019), that the role of responsibility in any particular mentorship framework is dependent on cultural influences. Few studies in the English language mentorship literature focus on responsibility, despite often acknowledging its presence. For this reason, responsibility is a focus point of the current study, with the intention to see if it is a culturally distinct aspect of peer mentorship in Japan, or can be

generalized to other forms of informal peer mentorship. As such, Japanese participants may place a higher value on responsibility and describe more responsibilities that the mentor and mentee have to each other than American participants.

Along with hierarchy and responsibility, the current study will investigate the socio-emotional and instrumental roles of the mentors described by each participant. There are different threads of meaning described in many studies on mentorship; some express how important it can be to have someone to “share their stress and seek tips”, (Lewinski et al., 2017) or share in a sense of belongingness (Graham & McClain, 2019). Other studies (and occasionally other parts of the same studies) focus on the instrumental, goal-oriented improvements that result from mentorship, and frame the relationships in that way (Erickson et al., 2009; Lalani et al., 2018). This current study investigates both of these dimensions, and as there is little research comparing instrumentality and socio-emotionality across these two cultures, we hope to uncover cultural differences in the ways in which our participants describe them.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook through the use of snowball sampling. Seven participants from the US and eight participants from Japan participated in the study. One Japanese participant’s responses were excluded from analysis due to describing a non-peer mentorship relationship, leaving seven participants from each country for a total of fourteen responses. Of these participants, all seven of the Americans identified as women, while in the Japanese sample we had six women and one man. All Japanese participants identified as Asian, while all American participants identified as white. In the American sample, two participants identified as low income, two medium income, one high

income and one declined to answer. In the Japanese sample, five participants selected medium income, and two selected low income.

Table 1

Japanese Participants Demographics

	Miu	Naomi	Yumi	Atsuko	Yoshiko	Hiro	Kana
Race	Asian	Asian	Asian	Asian	Asian	Asian	Asian
Age	N/A	21	21	21	21	20	N/A
Socioeconomic Status	Mid	Low	Low	Mid	Mid	Mid	Mid
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	M	F

*N/A = Declined to answer.

Table 2

American Participants Demographics

	Lana	Diana	Sarah	Esther	Mary	Regina	Molly
Race	White	White	White	White	White	White	White
Age	25	21	20	24	21	20	19
Socioeconomic Status	Low	N/A	High	Low	High	Mid	Mid
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	F

*N/A = Decline to answer.

Materials

All participants were asked a set of 18 questions relating to their experiences with informal peer mentorship in high school (See Appendix A). The majority of these questions are open-ended, so as to allow participants to craft a detailed narrative throughout their responses about their own lived experiences. These questions were designed to tap the concepts of hierarchy, responsibility, and instrumentality/socio-emotionality. Additionally, questions about satisfaction and continued contact with their mentor are included. This measure was developed in

English and translated into Japanese by the researcher, with three native Japanese speakers checking the translated version for accuracy.

Analysis

This study was administered via Qualtrics due to the international nature of the design. After giving consent to participate, all participants were presented with a set of qualitative questions about mentorship to answer while keeping a particular relationship in mind, followed by the demographic questions. Answers from both English and Japanese participants were coded using a grounded theory approach, a technique that has a long history in qualitative social scientific methods (Charmaz, 2014).

The primary researcher assigned pseudonyms to all participants and engaged in several rounds of coding, including open coding to identify emerging themes in the data, and axial coding to organize the codes into categories. Responses were coded holistically, all responses were analyzed during each round of coding. An experienced bilingual researcher assisted with the coding process, and through discussion and multiple rounds of coding helped identify additional codes and places where codes could be combined or separated. An outside coder with no knowledge of the research question was brought in to code a subset of responses and help ensure that the codes were saturated and no themes were left unidentified.

Results

Participants were asked to identify a peer who often helped them learn new knowledge or skills, served as a role model, or changed the way they thought about something. This could have been help with academics, an extracurricular activity, or even something social. They were asked to keep this person in mind while answering the questions in the survey, all of which directed them to think and write about a particular aspect of their relationship with that person.

Types of Relationships and Support

The first question asked participants to identify what the peer did for them, and to describe their relationship in detail. These responses described a variety of relationships, from teammate to friend to senpai. However, within these different relationships we found four main types of support: emotional support, athletic/club support, academic support, and social support. These categories were not mutually exclusive; participants often described these relationships changing, or spanning multiple types of support.

These types of support generally corresponded with one of the two relationship types previously mentioned: instrumental or socio-emotional. Academic and athletic/club support relations were often categorized as instrumental, which means that these relationships were centered around mutual effort towards a particular outcome, with a focus on the expertise that the mentor provided. On the other hand, relationships with an emphasis on social support and emotional support were generally coded as socio-emotional relationships, meaning that the focus of the relationship was on the bond and the social roles of the mentor and mentee, beyond any particular expertise or function held by either party.

Table 3

American Participants

	Lana	Diana	Sarah	Esther	Mary	Regina	Molly
Academic Support	X	X			X	X	X
Athletic/Club Support				X	X		
Emotional Support	X						X
Social Support	X						
Mutual Support	X	X					

Table 4*Japanese Participants*

	Miu	Naomi	Yumi	Atsuko	Yoshiko	Hiro	Kana
Academic Support							X
Athletic/Club Support		X	X		X		
Emotional Support	X			X			
Social Support						X	
Mutual Support	X						

In general, American participants spoke more often about academic support, such as help with studying, as compared to Japanese participants, while the reverse was true for athletic/club support, such as help improving at a sport or working together as a team in a club, a finding that makes sense in light of the importance placed on clubs in Japanese schools (Cave, 2004). While these types of support were different, they were both often defined by instrumental goals; there was a desire to improve at a particular skill or domain, one that the mentor had expertise in. Mary, an American participant, describes the support she received as such: “This person was on my sports team, and they were 2 years older than me. She helped me on my writing activities for Global 10 honors. She taught me better vocabulary and helped with my grammar. She also helped me study in Spanish class, she would quiz me on vocal.” When asked if her mentor had any expertise that led to their relationship, Mary said that “She was 2nd in her class and a very well rounded academic.” At first glance, this seems to be a straightforward example of an instrumental relationship based on academic support and, albeit from someone who Mary originally met through athletics. Mary saw the relationship differently though, stating, “I think she felt as if I was a younger sister, so she'd give me lots of studying advice, relationship advice,

and she always listened when I had to get something off my chest,” when asked about what sort of responsibilities her mentor had, and referring to her as “like the big sister I never had” when asked to define their relationship. Although their relationship began with an instrumental purpose, Mary clearly illustrates that it moved beyond that into something more personal.

Another American participant, Esther, describes her relationship in a similar way,

I think our relationship started as more of a training relationship where the coach put us together as training partners because we both ran the same event. But as time went on it changed to a friendship where we started going on adventures during practice and hanging outside of practice/school. Which continued when I graduated where we kept in contact and tried to get together when I was home on breaks.

Here we can see again that Esther’s relationship with her mentor began with an instrumental, goal-oriented relationship (e.g., “She helped me with training tips and proper running form”), but developed into a strong socio-emotional bond, moving out of just a mentorship paradigm and into a full-on friendship

Despite these two illustrative examples, the opposite pattern was actually more common among American participants, with responses frequently describing someone that the participant was already close to moving into a helping role. Sarah describes her relationship as such,

This person was one of my closest friends even though we were exact opposites. She helped change the way I thought about a lot of things, but particularly physics. We were really perfect partners for physics because we both came at challenges from entirely different angles which was very helpful to be able to see and have a different point of view explained.

When asked about her mentor's expertise, Sarah responded that she was "just a close friend who disagreed with me on a lot of things," and later clarified that, "We had already been friends but it (the mentorship) did help us become closer." Sarah painted a picture of a close friend who responded to her need for help in physics, developing into a relationship of academic support that actually strengthened their non-academic friendship. Molly, another American participant, described something very similar,

My best friend and I were in biology together freshman year. The material came easy to her and she always did really good on the test. For me I struggled with biology so after the first test and I did bad my best friend helped. We studied together and she helped me understand the material better.

Molly's relationship is an illustrative example of how mentoring relationships can spring from preexisting friendships, as someone who she already had a socio-emotional bond fulfilled an instrumental role for her.

Taken as a whole, most American participants described their relationships with a mix of instrumental and socio-emotional themes, often with a relationship that began as help towards an instrumental goal becoming more personal and emotional, or a pre-existing socio-emotional relationship branching into instrumental help. Only one American participant described her relationship as primarily socio-emotional, and none described theirs in strictly instrumental terms.

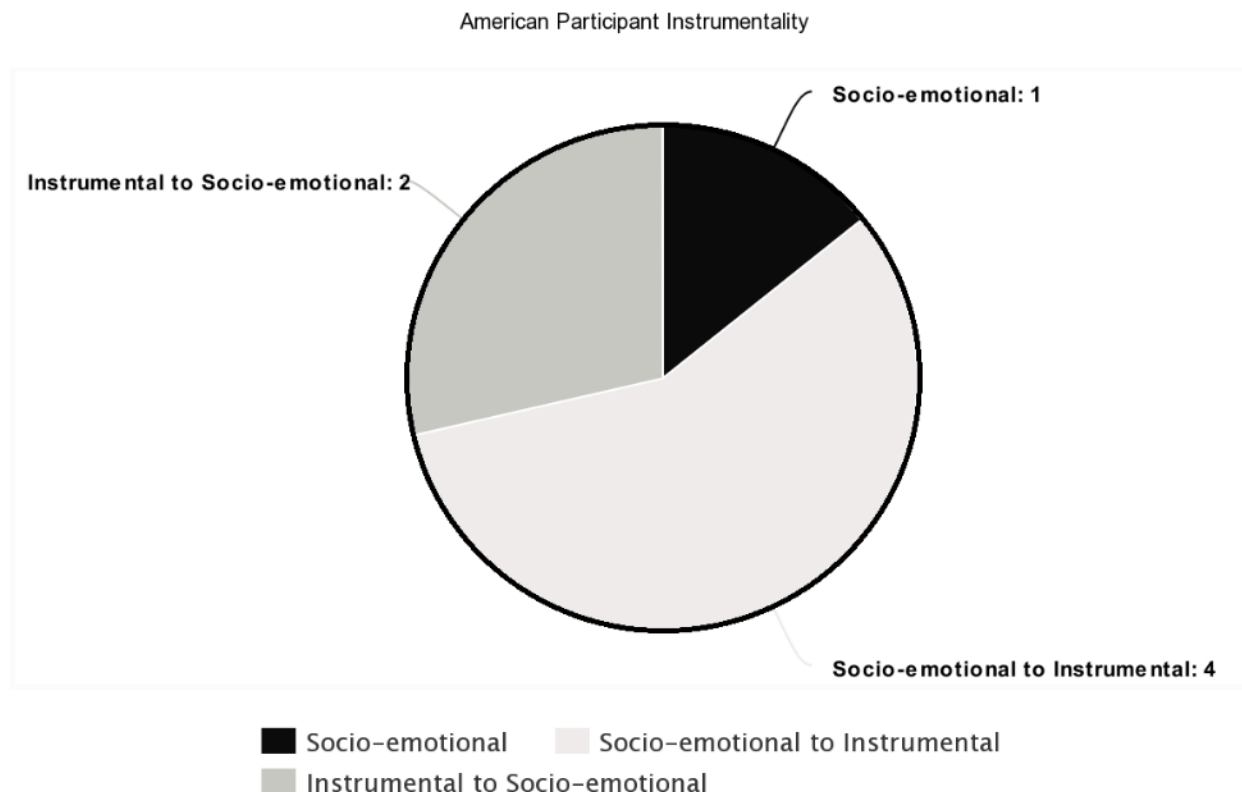


Figure 1. Proportion of instrumental and socio-emotional relationships among American participants.

While American participants' relationships often toed the line or drifted between these categories, some Japanese participants described relationships with more defined roles. Yoshiko describes her mentorship in very instrumental terms, when asked what the person she was thinking of did for her; she said, "During high school, a friend from my softball helped me during my batting practice." She follows up by saying that her mentor did have special expertise that lead to Yoshiko seeking her help, "She was the #1 batter on the team, and she gave me some tips." These answers indicate that Yoshiko had a particular need, in this case to become better at batting, and sought out advice from someone she knew was able help her, resulting in a straightforward instrumental relationship

While she does describe this person as a friend, Yoshiko makes clear what their relationship was about, “We weren’t really involved in each other’s personal lives, but after playing together we learned about their way of thinking, which helped to bring the team together.” Here the focus is shifted from away from their relationship as a dyad, to how the support they were offered helped the entire team by increasing cohesion, further emphasizing the instrumental role that Yoshiko’s mentor played.

Kana, another Japanese participant, stated the difference between a socio-emotional and instrumental relationship quite clearly. She said that her mentor “Taught me things I didn’t understand in class,” but that “just because someone helps you doesn’t mean that you’ll develop a bond with them.” This too reflects an instrumental relationship, this time with very little in terms of socio-emotionality.

On the other end of the spectrum, some Japanese participants thought about their relationships in very socio-emotional ways. Miu, for example, said that her mentor was “A close friend since middle school. She taught me to pursue the things that I’m good at.” Miu is clear that her mentor is a friend, (e.g., “Even after graduating, we’re best friends and still see each other a lot.”) but also makes it clear that she looked to them as a role model in some ways, “When I was going through tough times, seeing my friend doing her best encouraged me.” Rather than explicit support intended to fill a particular need as Yoshiko had, Miu’s relationship with her mentor was one where the help was indirect, and inextricably linked to their strong friendship.

The support that one receives in a socio-emotional relationship can also be more direct too. Another Japanese participant, Atsuko, describes her mentor as follows:

We met in middle school and were in the same class together for six years. When I was having a tough time she would mess around and make me laugh, and when I was worrying she would give me a push forward with good advice and positive words.

Atsuko describes some of the benefits of having a deep, emotional connection: the ability to share your worries and receive support. When asked if her mentor had any particular expertise, Atsuko replied, “She didn’t have any particular knowledge, but she said that hugging would reduce stress, and hugged me when I was having a hard time.” For Atsuko, there was no one particular time or function for which she needed support; having her friend there to offer comfort at different times throughout their time together was what made this relationship so meaningful.

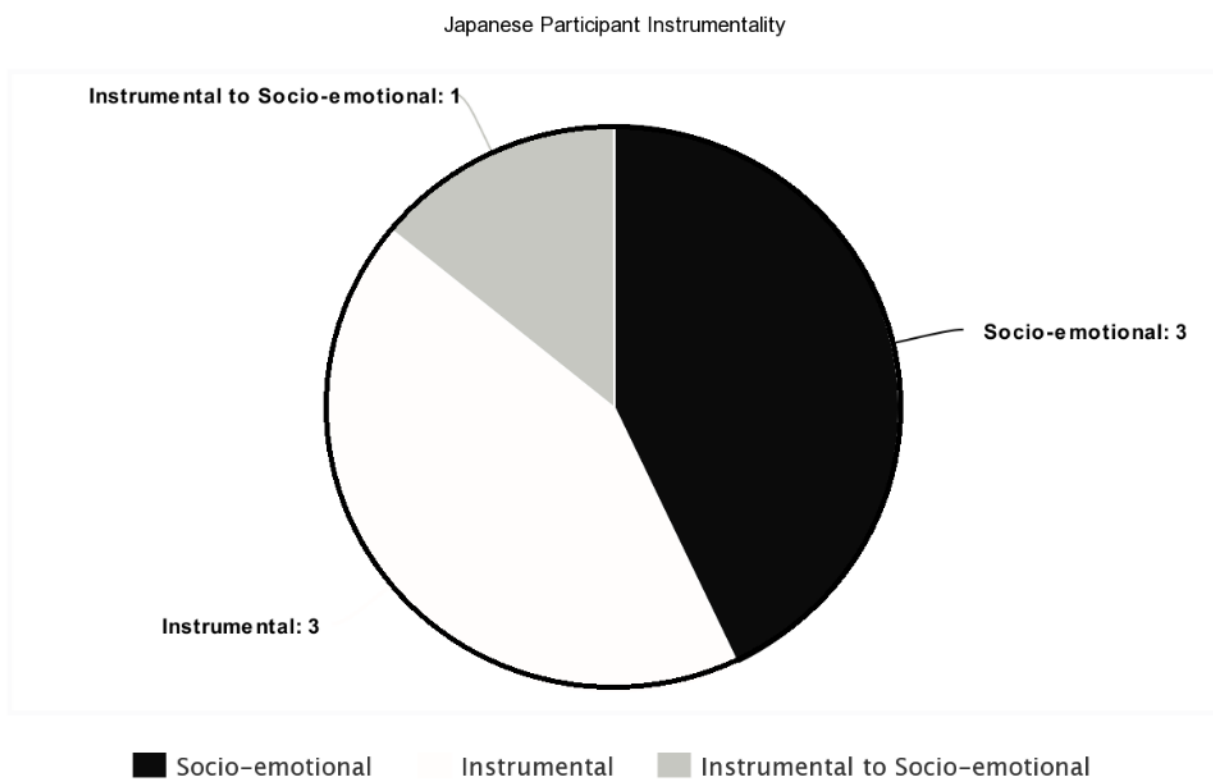


Figure 2. Proportion of instrumental and socio-emotional relationships among Japanese participants.

Six out of the seven Japanese participants described their relationships using firmly socio-emotional or instrumental terms, with only one indicating a shift from instrumental to

socio-emotional. Three of those participants spoke of their relationships in strictly instrumental terms, and while they may have described their mentor as a friend, these participants, such as Kana and Yoshiko, knew that their relationships had a clear purpose.

Taking the results from these two cultures comparatively, American participants rarely siloed their relationships into either of the instrumental or socio-emotional categories, often preferring to view them as a mix. The Japanese participants had the opposite pattern, and expressed whichever dimension they believed their relationship fell under more strongly, with less overlap.

Responsibility

A major focus of this investigation was the role of responsibility in informal peer mentoring relationships. Accordingly, participants were asked to describe the responsibilities they felt they had to their mentor, and that their mentor had to them. Frequently, these responsibilities corresponded to the role that they felt they played for their mentor and vice versa. For example, participants who described their relationship as a friendship may describe responsibilities they feel are implicit to the role of a friend, and so on. The largest of these categories was commitment, broadly construed, as it cut across the various subtypes of relationships that participants had. Examples of commitment are things such as keeping promises, being on time for meeting with each other, or ensuring that you keep the relationship going.

Other salient themes were positivity, advice/support and respect. Positivity included things such as wanting to be a good influence, make the other person feel happy, and so on. Advice/support was generally defined by participants feeling that they should offer something back to their mentors, either via help in an area of the participants own expertise or just generally

being there for them. Respect was coded for in fairly straightforward expressions of a desire to show regard and appreciation.

Table 5

American Participant's Responsibilities

	Lana	Diana	Sarah	Esther	Mary	Regina	Molly
Commitment		X	X	X	X	X	X
Positivity	X			X	X		
Advice/Support	X			X			X
Respect	X		X		X		

Table 6

Japanese Participant's Responsibilities

	Miu	Naomi	Yumi	Atsuko	Yoshiko	Hiro	Kana
Commitment		X		X	X		X
Positivity						X	
Advice/Support	X			X			
Respect		X	X	X			

Mary, who described her relationship as “mentor/mentee... she was like the big sister I never had.”, felt that she had some responsibilities to fulfill in her role as the mentee. “I felt that I had to be reliable and steady, never canceling plans. I was respectful to her as she was like a mentor. We were always very kind to one another.” Here Mary is describing the responsibilities she feels are inherent in the role of a mentee: not wasting her mentor's time, showing respect, and being kind. Earlier, Mary indicated that she felt her mentor was like a big sister, but here she makes that part of their relationship explicit, indicating that her mentor had the responsibilities that an older sister might have, such as relationship advice.

Esther too felt that the roles she felt she and her mentor had informed their responsibilities, but for her this was within the context of sports. On her responsibilities, she said that,

I wouldn't label them responsibilities that we had for each other except always offering support and being there to help her out when I could. But also keeping with our commitments to each other if we had plans to run with each other.

While she felt hesitant to use the label of responsibility, we can see that Esther felt it was important to keep commitments when they decided to run together. She affirmed this when asked about her mentor's responsibilities, “I would just say that I only really expected from her that she continue to want to run and train with me and still wanting to be my friend.” Esther had previously indicated that while her relationship began as one of running partners and developed into a friendship, here she is saying that she had an expectation that both halves of the relationship continue.

Others viewed their responsibilities as ones befitting a more traditional friendship. Lana took these responsibilities very seriously,

I always felt as if I had to remain a strong, positive role in my friend's life—probably most notably because their parents were super strict and had high expectations on who their child interacts with. I always made sure to be respectful and polite in their home and made sure to be the best possible support their child could have.

Lana felt that being a positive influence was important to keeping their friendship going, particularly given her mentor's family circumstances. For Lana, this meant that being respectful to her friend's parents and ensuring that she was supporting her was important. She also felt that these responsibilities were mutual, “My friend would probably say they had similar

responsibilities to me and made sure that they always remained a positive influence in my life.” Lana may not have felt she knew exactly what her mentor’s responsibilities were, but felt she could infer that her friend would feel the same way.

While there are differences in the ways that these relationships were construed, and indeed the responsibilities inherent in them, Japanese participants also often felt their responsibilities were derived from the role they and their mentor played for each other. Yoshiko, who received help from a softball teammate, stated that she had a responsibility to “Honestly put what I learned into practice and express my gratitude, not just through my words but through my play.” Yoshiko felt that since this person put time and effort into helping her, it was her responsibility to make use of what she learned. In response to the question about her mentor’s responsibilities to her, Yoshiko said that “I think they felt they wanted to motivate me a little, and teach me to become better at batting.” This is a pretty straightforward responsibility related to the instrumental goal that Yoshiko and her mentor's relationship was based on. While Yoshiko felt she had to show her gratitude through enacting what her mentor taught her, her mentor had the responsibility to teach her what to do better.

As described earlier, the senpai-kouhai relationship has its own distinct inherent responsibilities, and Naomi identified some of these in her response. She said that her responsibilities were “Mainly showing respect and responsibility towards my senpai,” and that her mentor’s responsibilities were about “As a leader, giving instructions to your members.” Naomi’s answers correspond well to the general roles that senpai and kouhai have in Japanese society, and it’s clear that Naomi viewed her relationship through this framework.

While there was commonality in how American and Japanese participants described their responsibilities as being related to their roles, the individual roles and responsibilities within

them certainly differed. This suggests that depending on how the mentorship is framed inside cultural context, whether explicitly as a mentorship or a friendship or something else like the senpai-kouhai relationship, the responsibilities people feel may differ.

Hierarchy

American participants were united in their belief that their relationships were egalitarian. None of them described their relationships as hierarchical, even when there may have been a difference in age or expertise. Mary, for example, stated that

I felt like there was no difference between us other than age and academics. She was no doubt smarter than I was but she never made me feel that way. In our friendship we were equal, and even when she tutored me I felt that we were equal as we had different academic strengths.

Here we see that Mary is expressing how, despite differences in ages and academic abilities, she was never made to feel inferior or lower than her mentor. Notable is her belief that they were equal because they had different strengths— a sentiment that was widely endorsed in the American sample. Regina, another American participant, had a similar view; “She would always help me with schoolwork and I would help her with things I’m better at doing.” These responses suggest that they believe their relationships were egalitarian because they had their own form of expertise that the participants could help their mentors with.

Others didn’t feel the need to justify their sense that their relationships were egalitarian. American participant Lana stated that,

Our relationship was definitely egalitarian, and both experienced our own ups and downs in our childhood. We never judged or compared our situations to each other and always supported each other no matter what.

Inherent in her answer is that sense that a hierarchical relationship is one of judgment and comparison, something Lana doesn't believe to have experienced with this person. She later says that, "We are both very strong minded, so we definitely have gotten into arguments where we both felt we were right." While this may not seem to reflect egalitarianism at first glance, the fact that both of them felt comfortable expressing their own views and trying to convince the other of them reflects an equal relationship.

While most Japanese participants still stated that their relationships were egalitarian, there were more mixed answers than their American counterparts. Japanese participant Hiro, when asked if his relationship was hierarchical, states that "Everyone gave a lot of charity, a lot was given by one side." Here Hiro is saying that he felt the relationship was one-sided, that he felt he was given a lot more than he gave back, and hence felt it was hierarchical. Kana simply stated that it was "half-half" when asked if her relationship was egalitarian or hierarchical, reflecting that she wasn't comfortable neatly slotting it into either category.

Others, like the American participants, felt their relationships were straightforwardly egalitarian. Atsuko describes her relationship with her mentor as one of equals,

I don't think we had any difference in status. She was a very lively person, and when we first met I found her a little scary and didn't want to be friends with her. However, she's really kind, and takes a lot of care not to make people feel uncomfortable. Because of this, I think we could both be ourselves and have an equal relationship.

Here Atsuko states that despite feeling a little bit intimidated by her mentor at first, she eventually felt that she could be natural with her and this led to an egalitarian relationship. While Atsuko stated frequently that she felt she was very supported by her, her mentor made her feel like an equal. Miu expressed a similar sentiment, "We had a peaceful relationship. We didn't

fight, because we were able to live while keeping each other's feelings in mind.” Miu’s answer reflects a sense that egalitarian relationships are more peaceful and lead to less fighting, and are also based on some sort of mutual understanding.

While we expected that those who described a senpai-kouhai relationship would feel their relationships are more hierarchical, Naomi disagreed, saying that “Just because our ages were different doesn’t mean we had a difference in status.” Later on however, when asked about responsibilities she felt towards her mentor, she states that “Mainly respect and responsibility towards them as a senpai.” While rejecting any explicit notions of hierarchy in their relationship, Naomi still felt that her role as a kouhai meant she had to show a certain amount of respect for someone she felt was an equal.

While American participants were united in their rejection of hierarchy, results were more mixed in the Japanese sample. Regardless, there was still a sense among both samples that an egalitarian relationship was the ideal, as exemplified by Mary and Atsuko’s responses. Still, the Japanese participants who felt their relationships were more hierarchical still viewed their mentors positively, reflecting that while egalitarian relationships may have been the ideal, some salience of hierarchy wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. American participants were more explicit in their understanding of egalitarianism being an absolute benefit, as Sarah makes quite clear, saying that, “There was no difference between us, which is partially what made our relationship so beneficial.” Overall, the data reflects that American participants felt strongly and positively about egalitarian relationships, and while Japanese participants had more mixed results, most answers were still in favor of egalitarianism.

Benefits

Participants in both samples described a wide array of benefits that they felt they received from their mentorships. In the data, we noted eight main categories of benefits, as well as participants who described limited benefits from the relationship; expressing that not much would have changed if they hadn't had the relationship. Some of these benefits were academic improvement, such as better grades or performance in class; another was "informed future relationships," where participants said this relationship impacted how they've thought about relationships going forward; as well as "change in perspective," which involved the participant expressing that their viewpoint or way of thinking about a certain topic or topics was changed as a result of their mentorship.

Others benefits included inspiration, wherein participants described being inspired by their mentor or seeing them as a role model; enjoyment/happiness, which was coded for when participants said they enjoyed things more or were happier because of their mentor; as well as life skills/general knowledge, which encompassed an improvement in skills outside of academic or club/athletic settings; and finally team or group improvement, wherein participants said that their mentorship helped not only them and their mentor, but also the team or club that they were in as a whole.

Beginning with the more concrete benefits, academic support was common among participants and thus academic improvement was an often implied benefit. However, two American participants made that implication more explicit. When asked how her life may have been different without her mentor, Mary noted that, "She inspired me to be a better student. Therefore I think my life would be different because I wouldn't have tried hard in school and gotten into my current college." Mary doesn't just describe immediate benefits, such as doing

better on a particular test, but rather emphasizes the long-term benefits of the academic tutelage she received, helping her get into a better college and become a better student. This aspect of her responses ties into another theme that was quite frequent in responses among both samples: a change in perspective.

Table 7

Japanese Participant's Benefits

	Miu	Naomi	Yumi	Atsuko	Yoshiko	Hiro	Kana
Change in Perspective	X	X		X	X		
Informed Future Relationships					X	X	
Enjoyment/Happiness					X	X	
Increased Confidence		X	X				
Academic Improvement							
Life Knowledge/Skills		X				X	
Limited Benefits							X
Inspiration	X						
Team or Group Improvement			X		X		

Table 8

American Participant's Benefits

	Lana	Diana	Sarah	Esther	Mary	Regina	Molly
Change in Perspective			X			X	X
Informed Future Relationships					X		
Enjoyment/Happiness	X		X	X			
Increased Confidence				X		X	
Academic Improvement					X	X	
Life Knowledge/Skills							
Limited Benefits		X					
Inspiration							
Team or Group Improvement							

Sarah makes multiple notes of this theme, first in academic settings, “She helped change the way I thought about a lot of things, but particularly physics.” While the aid she received in physics was by no means unimportant, Sarah later mentions this change in perspective in a more perhaps more impactful way, when asked what her life would have been like without her mentor she states that, “She was the optimist to my pessimist, I think I would simply have seen a lot of high school in a much more negative light.” and expresses that the biggest thing she took away from the relationship was “A more positive outlook! Not as my first reaction, but also as a counter.” Taken together, we can see that being exposed to a different, more positive point of view in both academic and broader settings made a big difference for Sarah.

A very similar pattern is present in Regina’s response, as she notes that “She helped me get good grades and I felt without her I wouldn’t be as successful as I am today,” in a fairly direct example of academic improvement as a result of mentorship. However, she later follows up by saying that “I feel like I would have gone nowhere in life without her constantly pushing me to be better,” and that the most valuable thing she learned from her relationship was “To always be confident in what you are doing. To always push yourself past your comfort zone and not care about what people think about you.” While there were obvious, tangible academic benefits for Regina, she emphasizes that what was more valuable for her was the change in mindset she underwent as a result of her mentorship.

Changes in perspective were not restricted to the American sample; there were similar responses among the Japanese participants. Yoshiko, for example, says that “I didn’t just learn club-related skills, but also the importance of thinking of what you can do for other people and getting along better with them.” Yoshiko, who had described a very instrumental relationship

with a skilled softball player on her team, notes that she was able to extend the lessons she learned from that experience beyond her club and into the rest of her life.

An even more drastic example of a change in perspective was the one Miu described when asked what her life may have been like without her mentor, “I think I would have gone to the college my parents wanted me to and gotten the same type of job everyone does.” Here Miu is suggesting that had she not had this relationship, she would have had an entirely different life of doing what society expected of her. Instead, as she stated, she was taught to “pursue the things she’s good at.” Miu and Yoshiko’s responses are powerful examples of the transformative power that mentorships can have during development, and taken alongside Sarah and Regina’s responses we can see that this power is not limited to one culture.

In a similar vein, many participants emphasized that these relationships made them feel more valuable, or increased their confidence. Miu’s mention of being taught to pursue what she was good at is one example of this theme, but it was not limited to her. Among the Japanese participants, Yumi said that her relationship “gave me a little more confidence.” While it may not have been the most impactful relationship in her life, she still felt she got something important out of it. On the other end of the spectrum, Naomi said, in reference to what her mentor did for her, “They changed the value of my entire existence.” Naomi clearly felt strongly that this relationship shaped who she is now, and that she was better off for it.

This theme was present in the American sample as well. Answering what she felt was the most important thing she learned from her relationship, Regina said that it was “To always be confident in what you are doing. To always push yourself past your comfort zone and not care about what people think about you.” Esther echoed the same sentiment in her answer, saying that “I feel like I learned that my opinions, voice, and thoughts matter and I should be confident in

the person/athlete I am.” During tumultuous high school years, these lessons of confidence and self-worth are incredibly important ones, and these participants learned them from their mentors.

Discussion

This study intended to explore how students experienced informal peer mentorship relationships during high school in the US and Japan. We systematically sorted through the complex relationships that our participant described and used an inductive qualitative approach, in order to identify emergent themes in the data. While building off of prior research on mentorship in the US and Japan (Darling et al., 2002), we hoped to not only take a closer look at these relationships within cultural context, but also to focus in on peer mentorship, a powerful and valuable relationship (e.g. Tsang, 2020) that is still under researched, particularly in high school contexts. We believe that these results can inform future investigations into a variety of topics related to peer mentorship and peer interactions generally in high school, as well as opening the door to further research on how these relationships may vary across cultures.

While participants described relationships that fell under our definition of mentorships, they frequently identified them as friendships, or relationships between teammates, classmates or senpai and kouhai. All of these relationships and more are places from which mentorship can spring, as the relationship is fundamentally one defined by the transfer of knowledge and expertise (Cree-Green et al., 2020; DeForge et al., 2019) and peers of various types are well poised to fulfill this role. Among other things participants described teammates helping them in a sport, classmates helping with academics, and friends supporting them emotionally and socially.

However, our participants indicated that these experiences had more value than simply learning something new or getting help on a particular task. Many felt that these relationships changed their lives or made them think about things very differently; these were clearly highly

impactful relationships. Previous qualitative research on peer mentorship has found similar themes among college students and professionals (Cree-Green et al., 2020; Tsang, 2020), but the current investigation indicates that these relationships can be very powerful and transformative in high school as well.

Differences and Similarities

Overall, this investigation described a number of differences and similarities in informal peer mentorship relationship in the two cultures we investigated: the US and Japan. Participants in both countries described their relationships in both instrumental and socio-emotional terms, however, most American participants described their relationships beginning in one of those categories and shifting towards a mix between them, for example, a friend becoming an academic helper or a teammate becoming a close friend. Japanese participants on the other hand, seemed to have their relationships more firmly within one of these domains. This clearer organization of relationships among Japanese participants was an unexpected finding, but fits well within our understanding of relationships in the Japanese school. The *senpai-kouhai* relationship serves as one example of a relationship in which expectations, roles and responsibilities are well-defined in cultural context, but it is not the only one. Other relationships such as ones between teammates and classmates have their own salient roles and expectations within that cultural context, particularly given how important bonding within classes and teams is in Japan (Cave, 2004; Letendre & Fukuzawa, 2013). Future research looking at these patterns in a quantitative manner may help to determine if they are significant in a larger sample.

Hierarchy was a topic of interest going into the investigation, and it was no surprise that all American participants described their relationships as egalitarian, regardless of differences in age or expertise. Five Japanese participants followed suit; however, we had two who did not fit

the egalitarian mold: one Japanese participant who described their relationship as hierarchical and one who said it was “half-half.” While there could be any number of explanations for this small difference, further research on hierarchy in peer relationships could help to identify more significant trends.

Among both samples, perceptions of responsibility frequently corresponded with the role that participants felt they and their mentors played in the relationship. Friends had the responsibilities inherent in friendship, and so on. What differed were the responsibilities that participants assigned to a particular role. As an example, Yoshiko the Japanese softball player felt she needed to show her gratitude towards her mentor by taking what she learned and putting it into practice. On the other hand, Esther the American runner felt she needed to keep her time commitments to her running partner, but didn’t mention a need to perform better as a responsibility. In her response, Japanese participant Naomi described her responsibilities to be showing respect and responsibility towards her mentor as a senpai, with the understanding that these were implicit and baked into her role as the kouhai. This fits well with previous academic research on the senpai-kouhai relationship (Qie et al., 2019), and is an example of the type of culturally salient form of mentoring that may have more defined implied responsibilities.

Limitations and Strengths

Due to the unpredictability of the snowball sampling approach, the vast majority (n=13) of participants in this study identified as women, while only one participant identified as a man. Because of this, these results may not be indicative of the general patterns that men experience in these relationships. Further investigations with a more gender-balanced sample would help ensure that we capture any nuances missed because of this.

The questions in this investigation were administered as a survey, primarily due to time zone and recruitment issues. However, an interview format likely would have allowed us to obtain richer data, as well as given us the ability to ask probing questions and delve deeper into the narratives that participants crafted.

Despite these limitations, this study had many strengths, allowing us to shed light on previous overlooked aspects of peer mentorship. The qualitative methodology utilized allowed us to examine these relationships in dynamic ways, and to see the ways in which our participants described them changing. The pattern of change in instrumentality among American participants, for example, is one finding that we may not have uncovered with a quantitative methodology.

Additionally, it is worth noting that these findings cross most if not all domains of development, with participants describing long lasting improvements in emotional regulation, social skills, academic ability (including language improvement), physical ability and so on. The open-ended nature of our inquiry allowed participants to describe relationships in all of these domains, and to truly demonstrate how powerful mentorship can be.

Implications and Future Research

In summary, the current investigation uncovered valuable insights into how informal peer mentorship during high school is viewed and conceptualized in these two cultures. We found that these relationships can be powerful forces for change and improvement in the lives of adolescents across a variety of different domains, including academics, extracurriculars and more.

While formal program-directed peer mentoring for high school students has been the subject of a variety of studies (Hacking et al., 2019; King et al., 2018), very few studies have investigated informal peer mentoring in high school to date. This study suggests that these

relationships are important, and if more deeply researched could provide us with a better understanding of how adolescent peers support each other and pass on knowledge. Further research examining the patterns in instrumentality, hierarchy and responsibility that we have identified could prove valuable in advancing this field of research.

While mentorship programs are often focused on underrepresented or disadvantaged youths, research into informal mentorship among said populations is lacking, and more attention in this area could better inform the ways those programs are constructed, and allow us to better understand the structure of effective mentoring relationships among those groups.

For those in applied settings, letting classmates or teammates help each other and giving them space to cultivate these relationships may have positive outcomes. Given that many of these relationships originated from extracurriculars and their benefits extended far beyond them, these results also make the case for how valuable sports and other club activities can be for high school students. Overall, we believe that this study is an opening to an important new line of research in the mentorship literature that may allow us to uncover previously overlooked aspects of peer relationships as a whole.

Appendix A

Mentorship Questionnaire English

In this survey, we are interested in learning about how young people develop relationships with peers who help them. Thinking back to your time in high school, please identify a peer who often helped you learn new knowledge or skills, served as a role model, or changed the way you thought about something. This could have been help with academics, an extracurricular activity, or even something social. Keep this person in mind when answering the questions in this survey. Please answer the following questions in as much detail as possible.

1. What did this person help you with or do for you? Please describe your relationship with them in as much detail as possible.
2. Did the other person have a particular role or expertise that led to them helping you? If so, please describe what it was.
3. Sometimes when people receive help from a peer in this way, a close personal relationship develops beyond the specific help it originated with, for example spending time with each other or confiding in each other. If this occurred in your relationship, please describe how this bond developed and what it meant to you.
4. How would you characterize what your relationship with this peer was? Specifically, what words or labels would you use? For example, friends, acquaintances, classmates, etc.
5. Some relationships are more hierarchical, with one member deferring to the other more often, while other relationships are egalitarian, with both members feeling that there is no

difference in status between them. Which of these types of relationships matches your experience more closely, and why?

6. In many relationships, people feel that they have responsibilities to each other, such as being respectful, providing a good example, and following through on commitments you make to each other. Did you feel that you had any responsibilities to this person? Please describe them in as much detail as possible.
7. Now, please tell me about any responsibilities that you felt that this person had to you in as much detail as possible.
8. If you had not had this relationship, in what ways do you feel your life would be different?
9. What kind of relationship, if any, do you have with that person today?
10. What do you feel were the most valuable things that you gained or learned from your relationship with this person?
11. Please note any aspects of this relationship (if any) that you feel were unpleasant.
12. Are there any details that you feel are important or relevant, but weren't covered by the previous questions?
13. What is your age?
14. Which gender do you identify with?
15. What is your nationality?
16. What is your ethnicity?
17. What is your socioeconomic status?

Appendix B

Mentorship Questionnaire Japanese

今回の調査では、高校の時に手伝ってくれるほかの生徒たちと若い人たちがどのように関係しているかを知りたいと思います。高校時代を思い出し、新しい知識とスキルを習得し、ロールモデルになり、何かについての考え方を変えた生徒に名前を付けてください。それは学問的、部活的、または社会的であっもいいです。この調査の質問に答えるときは、この人のことを覚えておいてください。以下の質問にできるだけ詳しく答えてください。

1. その人はあなたのために何を手伝って、何をしてくれましたか？この人とあなたの関係について、できるだけ詳しく教えてください。
2. 相手の方は、あなたを手伝うに至った特別な役割や専門知識を持っていましたか？もしあれば、それが何であったかを教えてください。
3. このようにほかの生徒から援助を受けると、一緒に時間を過ごしたり、打ち明け合ったりと、具体的な援助以上に親密な人間関係が生まれることがあります。このような関係になった場合、その絆がどのように発展し、あなたにとってどのような意味があったのか、教えてください。
4. この他の生徒とあなたの関係は何でしたか？具体的には、どのような言葉やラベルを使いますか？例えば、友達、知合い、先輩、など。

5. 一方が他方に譲ることが多い上下関係のある関係もあれば、お互いに身分の差はないと感じている平等主義の関係もあります。これらの関係のうち、どちらがあなたの経験に近いですか？その理由？
6. 多くの人間関係において、人はお互いに敬意を払うこと、良い手本を示すこと、約束したことを守ることなど、お互いに責任があると感じています。あなたがこの人に対して感じていた責任について、できるだけ詳しく教えてください。
7. では、この人があなたに対して持っていると感じた責任について、できるだけ詳しく教えてください。
8. もしこの関係がなかったら、あなたの人生はどのように変わっていたと思いますか？
9. その人と現在どのような関係にあるのか、あるとすればどのような関係なのか。
10. その人との関係から得た、あるいは学んだ最も重要なことは何だったと感じますか？
11. この関係で望まなかったことがあったら、記入してください。
12. これまでの質問では聞かれなかったことで、お伝えしたいことはありますか？
13. あなたの年齢は何ですか？
14. あなたの性別は何ですか？
15. あなたの国籍は何ですか？
16. あなたの民族は何ですか？
17. 社会経済的な状況を教えてください。

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