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Exploring the Impact of Natural Mentors on Sociopolitical Stress: Implications for Educators and Youth Workers

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Abstract

Aims: This study examines college students' access to natural mentors during the contentious 2020 U.S. presidential election and considers the role of natural mentors as protective factors in relation to coping and sociopolitical stress.

Methods: Data were collected from 588 students between the ages of 18 and 29 who were enrolled at 10 institutions of higher education across the U.S. at the time of data collection. Chi-square tests of independence explored differences in access to mentors. T-tests examined differences in sociopolitical stress and coping between those with and without mentors, and multivariable regressions examined whether relationship characteristics influenced these associations.

Results: Findings indicated significant differences in access to mentors based on gender, religion, and political affiliation. Furthermore, results indicated that mentored college students reported higher levels of coping. Relationship characteristics did not affect these associations.

Conclusion: Results highlight global implications for community practitioners as they support young adults' civic engagement in divisive sociopolitical climates, especially as elections become increasingly polarizing on a global scale.

Introduction

Young people benefit from relationships with caring non-parental adults (*natural mentors*; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Mentored youth are generally happier, healthier, and more resilient than non-mentored peers (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Natural mentors may be a means for college students, especially those from oppressed groups, to cope with the isolation and stress of 2020. The current study explored college students' access to natural mentors during the fall of 2020, as well as whether mentors promoted coping or protected against sociopolitical stress during a divisive presidential election within the U.S. We aim to better understand how adults support young people's involvement with social and political systems. By understanding youth's access to and engagement with natural mentors during contentious sociopolitical climates, community practitioners (youth workers, educators, organizers) may better understand how to tap into these relationships to promote youth civic development during tumultuous times. Furthermore, research examining the civic experiences of college students during a divisive election is especially relevant given the field's recent interest in centering community psychology teaching and research within undergraduate institutions (e.g., Lichty et al., 2019).

Natural Mentors

Traditional perspectives on naturally occurring mentoring relationships (NMRs) focus on mentors from outside of a youth's close inner circle (*weak-tie connection*; e.g., teachers, spiritual leaders), but recent

perspectives suggest that youth engage in and benefit from NMRs with *strong-tie connections*, as well (e.g., family members, older peers; Granovetter, 1973; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Community psychologists posit that positive relationships between youth and adults are critical components of empowerment across contexts (e.g., activism promotion, leadership development; Christens, 2012). Natural mentors promote growth in their mentees' lives by providing social support that enhances development across domains (e.g., social, emotional, and identity development; DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2006). Mentors often provide emotional support (e.g., empathy), informational support (e.g., advice to support healthy decision-making), or appraisal support (e.g., a context for mentee self-reflection; DuBois & Karcher, 2005). By supporting mentees across domains, mentors provide opportunities for learning and development (Rhodes et al., 2006). These supportive relationships may be particularly beneficial for youth who experience adversity (DuBois & Karcher, 2005).

Mentees benefit in numerous ways from NMRs. Mentored youth are more civically engaged during adulthood, suggesting that the positive impacts of NMRs are longstanding and cascade into broader social systems (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Younger people with NMRs report higher life satisfaction and well-being than non-mentored peers (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Those who have the support and guidance of a mentor also tend to demonstrate more resilience and experience fewer long-term consequences of stress than non-mentored youth (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Hurd et al., 2016). In addition to offering social support that may often buffer the negative effects of stressful life events (Wittrup & Hurd, 2021), natural mentors often promote enhanced mental health by modeling coping, or by sharing novel resources for healthy coping (Hurd et al., 2014; Sánchez et al., 2017).

Rhodes and colleagues' (2006) model of mentoring highlights several factors that influence relationship effectiveness. Per this theory, people benefit most from mentoring when they feel close to and supported by their mentors. Additionally, while variables such as contact frequency may not be as important as contact quality when it comes to maximizing benefits, mentees tend to benefit more from long-term mentoring relationships (e.g., more than one year long) than short-term ones (e.g., several months long; Rhodes et al., 2006).

As young people in college experience major changes to their social networks, it becomes increasingly important for them to seek support from caring adults (Berardi et al., 2020; Raposa & Hurd, 2021). College students experience increased independence, which results in higher risk that they make harmful decisions (Pedrelli et al., 2011), and the demands of college frequently contribute to elevated symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Ramón-Arbués et al., 2020). NMRs can, however, mitigate these psychological risks by promoting emotion regulation and, in turn, reducing common internalizing symptoms (Le et al., 2021). Further, emerging research in this domain highlights the importance of social support, often provided by natural mentors, in promoting attainment of educational goals (e.g., matriculating on time; pursuing career goals) for historically underrepresented students (Wittrup & Hurd, 2021). Researchers consistently find that youth from marginalized groups (e.g., those from low socio-economic positions; racial/ethnic minorities) have less access to NMRs than more privileged youth (Erickson et al., 2009; Raposa et al., 2018). This may be because more privileged youth often have increased access to diverse resources and connections (e.g., due to parental positioning; Erickson et al., 2009; Raposa et al., 2018). This differential access to mentors is problematic, as youth from marginalized backgrounds

often benefit *more* from NMRs than their more privileged peers because of the social capital mentors share (Erickson et al., 2009). Understanding inequities in access is critical for practitioners in order to coordinate strategic outreach efforts to young people who will benefit the most from these supportive relationships.

Few studies have examined access to NMRs for youth with different religious and political ideologies. One U.S. study exploring the intersection of mentoring and political/religious ideologies found that adults who identified as Classic Conservatives believed mentoring programs were less important than those who identified as Progressives (Hagler et al., 2020). Results suggest that religious identity plays a role in adults' attitudes toward mentoring; adults who fell into the "Religious Outsider" group (i.e., who identified as conservatives but held more liberal policy positions and endorsed higher levels of religiosity) were more likely to support and even volunteer in formal mentoring programs (Hagler et al., 2020). While this study only examines American political party affiliations, its findings have implications for how young people across the globe may experience differential access to NMRs based on mentors' political beliefs. However, little to no research has examined mentoring access based on mentees' religious and/or political ideologies. Such inquiry is critical as unequal access to mentors can exacerbate the impacts of systemic oppression and disadvantage on young people (Raposa et al., 2018).

Sociopolitical Stress

Little is known about how NMRs function with regards to experiences of sociopolitical stress. Sociopolitical stress stems from students' exposure to and potential involvement in political events, like social movements and elections (Ballard et al., 2020; Ballard et al., 2022). This stress is distinct from, yet often intersects with, traditionally studied forms of stress (e.g., personal, interpersonal, and collective stress; Ballard et al., 2020; Ballard et al., 2022). Examining how young people cope with sociopolitical stress will be critical to community psychologists' understandings of how they engage with, and are impacted by, social and political systems and movements. Provided that NMRs serve as resources to promote coping and stress reduction (Hurd et al., 2014; Hurd et al., 2016), we posit that these relationships may serve as protective factors for mentees' experiences of sociopolitical stress, either directly through stress reduction and/or indirectly through the transmission of coping skills. Because relationship quality and longevity often influence relationship effectiveness, it is possible that college students who felt connected to long-term mentors during this time coped better with sociopolitical stress than those who felt less connected. Nevertheless, examining the utility of close, supportive relationships with adults as buffers against sociopolitical stress will help community practitioners better understand young people's experiences within social movements and with regards to sociopolitical stress.

Current Study

While college students often experience heightened stress and internalizing problems (Pedrelli et al., 2011; Ramón-Arbués et al., 2020), during the fall of 2020 they also faced widespread isolation and loss due to COVID-19, mass media coverage of violence and hate crimes against minoritized groups, and a highly divisive political climate. Research suggests that social/political tension takes a toll on college students' mental health (Ballard et al., 2022; Hagan et al., 2020). Our study explores three key research questions. First, how did access to mentors differ for students of various demographics (e.g., gender identity, sexual identity, racial/ethnic identity, religious identity, and political affiliation) during an isolating and polarizing

sociopolitical climate? Second, are there differences in college students' experiences of sociopolitical stress or election-related coping between those with and without NMRs? Lastly, among students in NMRs, do relationship characteristics (e.g., longevity, closeness, etc.) predict sociopolitical stress or coping?

With regards to our first research question, we used quantitative methods to examine differences in access to NMRs based on sociodemographic identities. In line with prior research highlighting disparities in access to mentors for disadvantaged youth, we hypothesized that students who occupy systematically oppressed identities (e.g., gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, low SEP) would have less access to NMRs than those from more advantaged backgrounds (*Hypothesis 1)*. Given the nascent research in this domain, we used an exploratory approach to examine access across religious and political identities. For our second research question, informed by literature on the impacts of NMRs on stress and coping (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Wittrup & Hurd, 2021) we hypothesized that those with mentors would experience lower levels of sociopolitical stress than non-mentored peers *(Hypothesis 2a)*. Additionally, we hypothesized that mentored youth would report more coping with sociopolitical stress than non-mentored peers *(Hypothesis 2b)*. Regarding our third research question, in line with Rhodes' (2006) model of mentoring, we hypothesized that relationship characteristics (e.g., longevity, closeness, etc.) would significantly predict college students' experiences of sociopolitical stress and coping, such that those with higher quality relationships would experience lower levels of stress and more coping than those with lower quality relationships *(Hypothesis 3)*.

Method

Data Collection Procedures

Students across 10 colleges and universities were recruited to participate in an online study through virtual flyers and classroom announcements. We recruited students from public and private institutions on the West Coast (California, Washington), the Midwest (Michigan, Montana), the Northeast (New York), and the Southeast (West Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina). Participants received course credit through SONA, an online system used to manage participant pools, for completing one 45-minute online survey. The survey was administered during the leadup to the 2020 presidential election (October 5th - 18th, 2020). This study was approved by the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (#1014189).

Participants

Six hundred ninety-five college students completed our survey. Due to our interest in studying the experiences of typical college-age students, we restricted our analytic sample to those between the ages of 18 and 29 years old. Our analytic sample included a total of 588 students (*M age*= 19.56 years, *SD*= 1.83 years). A plurality (72.11%) of our sample identified as women, 27.21% identified as men, 0.68% identified as transgender or gender diverse (TGD). Our sample was 80.95% heterosexual and 19.05% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ+). Students identified as White (67.63%), Hispanic/Latinx (10.56%), Black/African American (4.26%), Asian (11.07%), and other identities (6.48%); one participant did not report their race/ethnicity. Participants' household incomes ranged from less than $40,000 (12.93%), $40-000-$100,000 (27.21%), and greater than $100,000 (35.88%); 141 participants (23.98%) did not report their household income.

Measures

Participants self-reported their gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and SEP. Due to small sample sizes, we collapsed gender identity into three groups: men, women, and TGD, which includes all other gender identities. We also collapsed sexual orientation into two groups: heterosexual and sexual minority, which includes all other sexual identities, because of small sample sizes for some identities.[5]

Participants also self-reported their religious affiliation by selecting from a list of 12 religions, or selecting "nothing in particular". For analyses, responses were collapsed into three groups: Christian, other religion, and not religious. Political party affiliation was indicated by selecting one option from the following: (1) Republican, (2) Democrat, (3) Green Party, (4) Libertarian, (5) Independent, and (6) Unaffiliated. Participants also selected which candidate they intended to vote for in the 2020 election from a list of the five major party candidates, wrote in another candidate, or indicated that they were "not sure" who they planned to vote for.

Regarding access to a natural mentor, participants first responded to the question *"Other than your parent(s) or whoever is raising you, do you have a role model or mentor who you go to for support or guidance?"* by selecting *"Yes"* or *"No."* Those who indicated that they had a natural mentor answered five follow-up questions regarding the characteristics of their mentoring relationship. To measure mentor's role, participants responded to the question *"What role does this mentor play in your life?"* by selecting their mentor's role from a list (*"Teacher/professor*", *"Religious/spiritual leader"*, or *"Athletic coach"*), or by typing their answer into a text box. We measured the closeness of the mentoring relationship by asking *"How close do you feel to your mentor these days?"* using a 5-point scale, with responses anchored at *"Not close at all"* and *"Very close".* To measure the amount of contact students had with their mentors, participants responded to the question *"How often do you see your mentor (either virtually OR face-to-face)?"* using an 8-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from "*Not at all"* to "*Almost every day".* As a measure of mentoring relationship quality, participants responded to the question *"How much do you feel that your mentor cares about you?"* using a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from *"Not at all"* to "*Very much".* Lastly, to measure the longevity of the mentoring relationship, participants responded to the open-ended question *"For how many years has this mentor been important in your life?"*. These measures were adapted from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Harris et al., 2019) measures of social support and mentoring. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for mentoring variables.

[5] Some demographic groups were collapsed due to small sample sizes and limited statistical power. We recognize the limitations of this approach in examining intersectionality, as well as the experiences of those occupying minoritized identities.

Table 1
Descriptive information for mentoring variables

	N	%	*M(SD)*	Range
Mentoring Relationship			-	-
Yes	338	57.48%		
No	250	42.52%		
Mentor's Role			-	-
Teacher/professor	86	25.44%		
Religious/spiritual leader	50	14.79%		
Athletic coach	38	11.24%		
Other- Family Friend	11	3.25%		
Other- Family Member	85	25.15%		
Other- Romantic Partner	7	2.07%		
Other- Friends/Peers	32	9.47%		
Other- Employer	6	1.78%		
Other- Healthcare Professional	10	2.96%		
Other- Unspecified	9	2.66%		
Missing	4	1.18%		
Relationship closeness			3.70 (1.02)	1-5
Not close at all	5	1.48%		
Only a little close	36	10.65%		
Somewhat close	103	30.47%		
Quite close	105	31.07%		
Very close	89	26.33%		
Frequency of contact			5.68 (1.64)	1-8
Not at all	8	2.37%		
Less than once a year	8	2.37%		
About once a year	13	3.85%		
Every few months	46	13.61%		
About once a month	55	16.27%		
About once a week	109	32.25%		

Two to five times a week	48	14.20%		
Almost every day	51	15.09%		
Mentor Cares about Mentee			4.51 (0.72)	1-5
Not at all	2	0.59%		
Very little	1	0.30%		
Somewhat	29	8.58%		
Quite a bit	95	28.11%		
Very much	211	62.43%		
Relationship Length (years)			8.88 (7.4)	0.16 - 29

To measure sociopolitical stress, participants responded to eight questions related to experiences of stress due to the 2020 election *("In the last week, how often have you felt nervous and 'stressed' about the 2020 election?"; "In the last week, how often have you found that you could not cope with things related to the 2020 election?")*. These questions were adapted from the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen & Williamson, 1988). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from *"Never"* to *"Very Often"* (*M*= 2.66, *SD*= 0.72). Higher scores reflected higher levels of sociopolitical stress. This scale demonstrated strong internal reliability (α= 0.81).

To measure coping, participants were presented with a list of 21 coping strategies and were asked, "*Please respond to the following items as honestly as possible to reflect how much you use each coping strategy to cope with stress related to the current election"*. This measure was partially adapted from Wei and colleagues' (2010) Coping with Discrimination scale (7 items); the remaining 14 items were created for this study. Participants responded on a 5-point scale, with response options ranging from "*Never"* to "*Very Often".* A preliminary examination of responses to this scale indicated that there was little variability in responses to five items which were therefore dropped from subsequent analyses. Next, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to extract subscales from the remaining 16 items. Results from the EFA suggested that five unique factors explained a significant proportion of variance in responses (as determined by eigenvalues greater than 1). However, two of the 16 items (both related to drug/alcohol coping) did not load clearly onto one factor and were therefore dropped, resulting in a revised scale comprising 14 items, measuring five different domains of coping. Specifically, education/advocacy coping was measured through four items (e.g., *"I try to educate people so that they are aware of the importance of the election"*; *M*= 2.60, *SD*= 1.18; α= 0.92). Resistance/action coping was measured through three items (e.g., *"I channel my stress into more election action"*; *M*= 2.26, *SD*= 0.98; α= 0.77). Coping through the use of drugs and alcohol was measured with one item (*"I use drugs or alcohol to take my mind off the election"; M*= 3.57, *SD*= 1.12*).* Coping through social support *(*e.g., *"I ask others for help or support"; M*= 2.55, *SD*= 1.05, α= 0.79*)* and self-care (e.g., *"I practice 'self-care' activities like taking a bath, taking a walk, listening to music"; M*= 2.91, *SD*= 1.15, α= 0.77) were measured with three items each. See Ballard et al. (2022) for more details on this measure.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach was used to analyze mentor roles within text box responses to the mentor role question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For more information on the coding process and themes, see Appendix A. Quantitative analyses were conducted using the *stats* package in R version 3.6 (R Core Team, 2019). We conducted Chi-square tests of independence to examine differences in access to natural mentors across demographic groups. We then conducted independent samples *t*-tests to test differences between the average levels of sociopolitical stress and coping for those with and without natural mentors. Among the subsample who reported having a mentor, we conducted multivariable regressions to explore how mentoring relationship characteristics predicted sociopolitical stress and coping, while accounting for relevant sociodemographic variables.

Results

We first examined the correlations between sociopolitical stress and the five election coping subscales. Sociopolitical stress was moderately correlated with all of the election coping subscales scores (*r*s ranged from .31 to .53, all *p*s < .01; see Appendix B). The correlations between the election coping subscales were all significant and moderate to large in magnitude (*r*s ranged from .33 to .73, all *p*s < .01). Next, we examined whether there were differences in access to natural mentors across sociodemographic groups (see Table 2). We did not detect any differences in access to mentors by race/ethnicity (not supporting Hypothesis 1), but did find that women were more likely than men to report having a mentor (p = .029). Regarding differences in access to mentors by religious affiliation, post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons indicated no differences in access to mentors between Christian participants and participants who identified with another religion (p = .433), but both Christians (p < .001) and those who identified as another religion (p = .006) were more likely to have a mentor than non-religious participants. There was a significant association between political party affiliation and access to mentors such that Republican participants were more likely to have access to mentors than Democrats (p = .027) and participants who were unaffiliated with a political party (p = .019). No other differences were identified.

Table 2
Sociodemographic differences in access to mentors

	N	***n* with mentor**	***n* without mentor**	**Chi square tests of independence**
Race/Ethnicity				$\chi^2(1) = 0.82$, $p = .365$
White	397	233	164	
Non-White	125	71	54	
Gender Identity[1]				$\chi^2(1) = 4.75$, $p = .029$
Man	160	81	79	
Woman	424	257	167	

Socio-economic Position				$\chi^2(2) = 5.23, p = .073$
Less than $40,000	76	36	40	
$40,001-100,000	160	100	60	
More than $100,000	211	115	96	
School Type				$\chi^2(1) = 0.29, p = .590$
Public	481	274	207	
Private	107	64	43	
Religion				$\chi^2(2) = 14.21, p < .001$
Christian	195	128	67	
Other religion	175	108	67	
Not religious	178	84	94	
Sexual Orientation				$\chi^2(1) = 0.87, p = .352$
Heterosexual	476	278	198	
Sexual Minority	112	60	52	
Political Party Affiliation[2]				$\chi^2(3) = 7.91, p = .048$
Republican	132	88	44	
Democrat	258	142	116	
Independent	42	28	14	
Unaffiliated	144	76	68	
Candidate voting for[3]				$\chi^2(2) = 5.54, p = .062$
Republican party: Donald Trump	123	77	46	
Democratic Party: Joseph Biden	335	184	151	
Not Sure	45	32	13	

Note. [1]Due to small sample sizes, participants identifying as TGD ($n = 4$) were excluded from analyses examining differences by gender identity. [2]Participants affiliated with Green Party ($n = 5$) or Libertarian party ($n = 7$) were excluded from analyses examining differences by political party affiliation. [3]Participants planning to vote for the candidate from the Libertarian Party (Jo Jorgensen; $n = 14$), the Green Party (Howie Hawkins; $n = 4$) and the Independent Party (Brock Pierce; $n = 2$) were excluded from analyses examining differences in access to mentors by the candidate they planned to vote for.

Prior to conducting *t*-tests, we examined whether the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met using Levene's test. This assumption was met in all cases except for the drug/alcohol coping item; in this case, we report Welch's *t*-test for unequal variances. *T*-test results indicated that participants with mentors reported significantly higher scores on all five coping subscales than those without mentors (supporting Hypothesis 2b), but there was no significant difference in sociopolitical stress between those with and those without mentors (not supporting Hypothesis 2a; see Table 3).

Table 3
Independent samples t-test results comparing self-reported sociopolitical stress and coping between participants with and without mentors

	Mentor *n* = 338		**No Mentor *n* = 250**		*t*-test
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Sociopolitical Stress	2.67	0.69	2.65	0.75	$t(586) = 0.34$, $p = .732$
Election Coping - Education/Advocacy	2.69	1.14	2.47	1.22	$t(586) = 2.20$, $p = .028$
Election Coping - Resistance/Action	2.33	0.99	2.15	0.95	$t(586) = 2.23$, $p = .026$
Election Coping - Drug/Alcohol	3.66	1.04	3.44	1.22	$t(586) = 2.23$, $p = .026$
Election Coping - Social Support	2.67	1.05	2.38	1.03	$t(585) = 3.29$, $p = .001$
Election Coping - Self-Care	3.05	1.14	2.72	1.16	$t(586) = 3.46$, $p < .001$

Finally, we used multivariable regression to examine if, among the subsample of participants who reported having a mentor (*n* = 338), characteristics of the mentoring relationship predicted sociopolitical stress and election coping subscale scores. We were specifically interested in perceived closeness in the mentoring relationship, how much the participant felt that their mentor cared about them, and the duration of the mentoring relationship, as these factors may modulate the effects of mentoring relationships (Rhodes et al., 2006). In these regression models, we covaried for participants' religious affiliations, gender identity, and political party affiliation using dummy coding. These variables were selected as covariates because of the significant differences in mentor access for these groups of people noted in our Chi-square tests for independence. Although the overall models were significant, results indicated that mentoring relationship characteristics of closeness, care, and duration did not significantly predict how participants coped with election-related stress as measured by education/advocacy coping ($F(14, 199) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$), resistance/action coping ($F(10, 228) = 4.25$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .16$), social support coping ($F(10, 228) = 3.71$, $p <$

.001, R^2 = .14), or self-care coping (F(10, 228) = 2.82, p = .003, R^2 = .11). These results did not support Hypothesis 3. Participants' perceptions of how much their mentor cares for them, however, did predict lower sociopolitical stress (β = -.25, p < .001; F(10, 228) = 6.04, p < .001, R^2 = .21), and their perceptions of relationship closeness were associated with greater use of drug/alcohol coping (β = .15, p = 0.48; F(10, 228) = 2.48, p = .008, R^2 = .10), partially supporting hypothesis 3.

Discussion

Notably, we found no significant differences in access to mentors based on SEP or racial/ethnic identity. These findings were contrary to prior research evidence and our first hypothesis that those from disadvantaged groups would report significantly lower access to NMRs than more advantaged peers. Prior research in this domain primarily focuses on adolescents, so it is possible that we found no significant differences because college campuses are microsystems that promote increased access to adult mentors (Erickson et al., 2009; Raposa et al., 2018). Alternatively, because there are iniquities in mentoring within college and educational spaces, young people from marginalized backgrounds may have engaged in NMRs outside of the college context (McCoy et al., 2015). It is also possible that young people's success finding mentors is one factor that relates to their educational successes as college students, or vice versa. This serves as one example of how examining social relationships that span across systems can help foster a better understanding of how broader communities, such as four-year college campuses, function (Neal & Christens, 2014). However, examining a larger, more inclusive sample will be necessary for more in-depth analyses of college students' access to mentors.

We found that participants who identified as women were more likely to have mentors than those who identified as men. This finding is consistent with prior research examining access based on gender (e.g., Liao & Sánchez, 2016). Perhaps this difference in access is related to gender socialization; while girls are socialized to emphasize interpersonal connections, boys are more often socialized to focus on autonomy (Liang et al., 2014). Gender stereotypes may also impact help-seeking behaviors (e.g., turning to a mentor to cope; Liao & Sánchez, 2016).

We also found that religiously active participants were more likely to have mentors than those who identified as not religious. This higher level of access might reflect that religious communities serve as networks within which students might find mentors. Indeed, several of our participants reported that they viewed a member of their religious community as a mentor. Regarding political affiliation, participants affiliated with the Republican Party were more likely to have mentors than those who affiliated with the Democratic Party or those who were unaffiliated. Interestingly, while previous research suggests that those identifying as older or conservative demonstrate lower levels of support for formal mentoring programs (Hagler et al., 2020), our results suggest that younger conservative individuals may nonetheless engage in more informal methods of mentoring. Limitations notwithstanding, these results provide novel insight into the differential levels of access that young people have to mentors based on various facets of their identities. This new insight may guide outreach and programming intended to mitigate sociopolitical stress and to promote coping for those who might lack access to social support from mentors.

Contrary to our second hypothesis (Hypothesis 2a), we found that college students with mentors did not have lower levels of sociopolitical stress than those without mentors. This finding suggests that having a NMR during the leadup to the 2020 presidential election did not result in

significant levels of stress reduction. Although we hypothesized that those who benefitted from the social support of a mentor may have experienced reductions in stress compared to those lacking this support, it is possible that the highly stressful and polarizing sociopolitical climate impacted all students, regardless of their mentor status. Alternatively, different social support mechanisms outside of NMRs may have contributed to coping with sociopolitical stress. In other words, perhaps college students did not turn to their mentors for support with election-related stress, or mentors might not have felt comfortable initiating conversations about sociopolitical stress with their mentees within the polarizing environment out of fear of familial or community backlash. Indeed, emerging research suggests that teachers -- who young people commonly consider natural mentors -- often avoid engaging in conversations with students about sociopolitical events out of fear of pushback or discomfort (Dunn et al., 2019). Conversely, these results might also suggest that those who cope better with stress are more likely to seek out social support from mentors during stressful times. These attempts to cope may or may not have been healthy (e.g., drug/alcohol coping), and may have had varying levels of efficacy in reducing sociopolitical stress levels.

We found that mentored participants demonstrated significantly higher levels of education/advocacy coping, resistance/action coping, drug/alcohol coping, social support coping, and self-care coping than those without mentors. While we are not able to state with certainty that the presence of a mentor directly *caused* increases in coping, these findings support our second hypothesis (Hypothesis 2b) suggesting that mentors may serve as resources to promote coping during the divisive social and political climate. Alternatively, young people who were able to access mentors may possess more coping resources than non mentored peers. However, these observed differences in coping are inconsistent with the overall levels of sociopolitical stress reported by both groups. College students with mentors tried to cope with stress related to the sociopolitical climate in all ways more than those who did not have a mentor, even in ways that might traditionally be described as unhealthy coping (e.g., by using drugs and/or alcohol). It is possible that young people would benefit from leaning into new coping strategies that are more healthy or effective to overcome the stress of divisive sociopolitical climates. Further, given that perceived closeness with mentors was positively associated with using drugs/alcohol to cope, these findings may indicate that mentors model both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies to their mentees.

With regards to our third research question, we found that closeness, frequency of contact, and relationship longevity did not predict students' coping (not supporting Hypothesis 3). Yet, participants who felt that their mentors cared for them experienced lower levels of sociopolitical stress. These findings only partially supported our hypothesis that relationship quality and longevity influences the effectiveness of mentoring relationships. Although there was no difference in the sociopolitical stress of mentored and non-mentored students, it is possible that within-group differences were present. In other words, perhaps simply having a mentor is not enough for stress reduction in the absence of perceived strong support or care. In contrast, students who reported having mentors may have stronger coping skills than non mentored students, regardless of relationship quality. These results may be congruent with more recent scholarship that questions the role of relationship closeness and longevity in the effectiveness of mentoring relationships (e.g., Lyons et al., 2019; Lyons & McQuillin, 2021). Because increased independence is a hallmark of emerging adulthood, it is possible that frequency of contact and relationship longevity were less important to our college-

aged sample, and therefore did not impact stress and coping in the same way as perceived relational closeness (Arnett, 2007). With this in mind, perhaps it is more important for future researchers to study the behaviors that occur within the relationships that might contribute to feelings of care and support -- or those that promote engagement with diverse worldviews or civic activities -- rather than their characteristics. Cumulatively, results suggest that, while NMRs may promote coping for their mentees, as prior research suggests (e.g., Hurd et al., 2014; Sánchez et al., 2017), this does not necessarily imply that all coping behaviors are healthy or effective (e.g., drug/alcohol coping).

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, data were cross-sectional and the study was not a true experiment which limited our ability to draw causal inferences between NMRs, sociopolitical stress, and coping. Future research would benefit from employing experimental methods or exploring longitudinal pathways between these variables to better understand the causal links between these variables. Second, due to restricted sample sizes, we lacked statistical power to examine the nuances of college students' access to mentors; our analyses were sometimes limited to binary groups (e.g., "White vs. Non-White"), and we did not investigate intersectionality. Future research would benefit from using larger, more diverse samples to explore the unique nuances in access to mentors based on intersecting identities. Next, this study was conducted with students attending four-year colleges; although four-year college campuses are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of SEP and race/ethnicity (Monarrez, & Washington, 2020), results from this study may not be generalizable to other young adults. Additional research will be needed to better understand the experiences of young people in the workforce, those attending two-year colleges, or those enrolled in vocational programs. Our sample was also non-representative, which may further implicate generalizability of our results. Related to measurement, more clear measures of mentoring (e.g., asking students to think of an older adult who functions as a *mentor* in their life) may have yielded more accurate results regarding college students' mentorship experiences. Further, better measurement of relationship quality or of specific activities within NMRs may have aided in our understanding of how NMRs mitigate sociopolitical stress and promote coping.

Implications and Future Directions

Limitations notwithstanding, our study provides a snapshot of college students' access to NMRs during a highly stressful and isolating sociopolitical climate. Discrepancies in access to mentors highlight new avenues through which we might promote healthy coping by increasing access to mentors; while some religious groups or political parties might more often provide outreach and support to young people, other groups might benefit from increased programming and support during stressful times. Additionally, we highlight a new way that young people may benefit from access to natural mentors: increased coping with sociopolitical stress. By promoting positive coping during times of social and political turbulence mentors can support their mentees as they engage with social and political systems.

These findings offer several implications for community based practitioners. First, the social networks of young people who attend traditional four-year colleges may often differ from those of young people in the workforce or those who participate in nontraditional educational settings. For example, students who attend traditional four-year colleges may have access to novel social capital and more formal campus resources and supports, whereas young people in the workforce may rely on more informal social support (e.g.,

from family members or other members of their close inner circles) during tumultuous sociopolitical times (Barry et al., 2017; Cox, 2021; Mitchell & Syed, 2015; Raaper et al., 2022). Community-based organizations or programs are ideal contexts for non-traditional students or young people in the workforce to develop NMRs, as these organizations often provide a context within which young people may spend several hours per week with supportive adults outside of their close inner circles (Hamilton et al., 2006). Given research findings suggesting that several processes facilitated by NMRs, such as positive identity development, may contribute to the effectiveness of youth development programs, simply spreading awareness of the benefits of NMRs to community practitioners may help organizations maximize the effectiveness of their programs by cultivating supportive relationships within them (Hirsch, 2005). Additionally, community-based organizations who wish to support young people during stressful sociopolitical times may offer informal social programming to encourage connections between youth in the community and adults who work for their organizations. Community-based practitioners might also consider examining which groups of young people within their communities (e.g., youth of certain religious backgrounds, those occupying minoritized identities, etc.) may lack access to supportive adults and target outreach during stressful sociopolitical climates.

Community-based practitioners may also consider using principles from caregiver- and youth-initiated mentoring to identify and recruit mentors ahead of stressful sociopolitical times. These frameworks propose that caregivers and youth may play important roles in facilitating NMRs (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Spencer et al., 2021; Weiler et al., 2020). Caregiver-initiated mentoring is a framework for mentoring recruitment within which caregivers work together with community-based practitioners to identify their child's needs and facilitate a NMR between their child and a supportive adult, such as a youth development organization practitioner, a coach, or a religious leader (Weiler et al., 2020). Similarly, youth-initiated mentoring is an approach to recruitment wherein young people are encouraged to select a supportive adult within their existing social network to serve as their mentor (Spencer et al., 2021). Preliminary research findings suggest that promoting youth-initiated mentoring within one's community, or even simply adding on youth-initiated mentoring to pre-existing programming, can be an effective way to promote mentor recruitment and retention (Spencer et al., 2018; Spencer et al., 2021). Engaging in targeted outreach to young people and/or caregivers within the broader community to raise awareness of these methods of facilitating NMRs and/or encourage them to select one of their program staff as their natural mentor can be especially helpful in removing barriers to mentorship for young people who may struggle to identify a supportive adult within their close inner circle (Spencer et al., 2021).

Lastly, given that this increased coping with sociopolitical stress did not necessarily facilitate stress reduction in our sample, community-based organizations may benefit from providing training and ongoing support to community members, teachers, and afterschool care staff to equip them to model and promote young people's involvement with political and civic activities. This training might include education surrounding sociopolitical processes such as elections, as well as resources for getting involved within the community and/or coping healthily during stressful sociopolitical climates. Community psychology researchers can support these efforts by creating and sharing resources that are both empirically supported and accessible, both in terms of content/presentation (e.g., presenting specific examples of how to support healthy youth civic development; no excessive jargon;

etc.) and distribution (e.g., not placed behind a paywall; easily available on the internet or social media). Researchers may consider exploring recent resources and examples for educators (e.g., Dunn, 2021) for examples of how to create useful and accessible resources for supporting young people's civic involvement during stressful political climates. Regardless of whether or not community-based practitioners eventually develop NMRs with young people in their organizations, caring adults who are equipped to help young people navigate turbulent sociopolitical climates can serve as valuable assets for young people's civic development (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Promoting positive civic development, especially during times of divisive elections, can have benefits that cascade into a young person's broader community system.

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

Email first author for more details about data.

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Appendix A

Open Text Coding Procedures and Themes

An inductive approach was used to analyze mentor roles within the "Other" category of the mentor role survey question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The first author and two research assistants reviewed all open-ended responses, noting key themes. We met as a group to review identified themes, to select and define codes that captured all themes, and to create a codebook based on the consolidated codes. We then reviewed each response and recorded a "1" or "0" in the data spreadsheet to indicate whether a response fit that code; codes were mutually exclusive. Responses were coded twice independently by two research assistants (inter-rater reliability was 80%). The first author and the research assistants then met to review coding inconsistencies; inconsistencies were resolved using a consensus approach. Six themes emerged from the responses (see Table A1).

Table A1
Mentor Role Open Responses

Theme Definition	Example Quote
Family Friend (11 responses): Participants articulated that they look to adults connected to, yet outside of, their family systems for support and guidance.	*"Family Friend"* *"Father of a close friend"*
Family Member (85 responses): Participants expressed that they turned to nonparental adults within their family systems as mentors.	*"Brother"* *"Aunt"*
Romantic Partner (7 responses): Participants expressed that they turned to their romantic partner for support or guidance.	*"Boyfriend"* *"My partner"*
Friends/Peers (32 responses): Participants noted that peers served as sources of support or guidance.	*"My coworkers"* *"Older friend"*
Employer (6 responses): Participants identified that their supervisors-- through work or other organizations-- served as sources of support or guidance.	*"Former boss"* *"Employer"*
Healthcare Professional (10 responses): Participants identified that they receive support or guidance from various health professionals.	*"Counselor"* *"Physician"*
Other (9 responses): Participants expressed that they receive mentorship from nonparental adults not specified by other categories.	*"Public figures"* *"Life Coach"*

Appendix B

Table B1

Correlations between Sociopolitical Stress and Election Coping Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sociopolitical Stress					
2. Election Coping - Education/Advocacy	.43				
3. Election Coping - Resistance/Action	.53	.73			
4. Election Coping - Drug/Alcohol	.31	.67	.56		
5. Election Coping - Social Support	.50	.52	.61	.42	
6. Election Coping - Self-Care	.43	.33	.44	.33	.59

Note. all *ps* < .01.