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## Challenges in mentoring at-risk young adults: caseworkers' perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines the barriers, challenges and needs of 30 caseworkers who mentor at-risk young adults during the transition to adulthood. Professional mentoring relationships are an important source of support for at-risk young people. However, literature concerning the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentors is scarce. The theoretical thematic analysis revealed two major themes. The first theme- included challenges related to the young adults' personal histories and characteristics. The second major theme related to the mentors' expertise within their own services. The most dominant needs during the mentoring process were broad and current knowledge and ongoing training and support. The findings are discussed in relation to the mentoring literature and emerging adulthood theory. Implications for practice highlight the importance of the design and assimilation of programs that enable the promotion of meaningful mentoring relationships via organisational modifications.

### KEYWORDS

Young adults; mentoring; emerging adulthood; at-risk youth; transition to adulthood; support

Emerging adulthood is a significant developmental stage in young adults' lives and is considered a critical juncture between adolescence and adulthood. During this period, all young adults must make significant decisions in important areas of their lives including housing, employment, career and marriage (Arnett, 2000). Alongside its possibilities, this period holds many risks. Therefore, it is considered much more challenging for at-risk young adults (Arnett, 2014). Due to their lack of family support, socioeconomic status and low personal and social resources, these young adults are at higher risk of failing to negotiate this transition successfully (Courtney & Hughes-Huering, 2005).

In Israel, there are about 970,000 young adults between ages 18 and 26 (12% of the general population). According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, it is estimated that 200,000 of them are at risk for various reasons, including a history of abuse and neglect, substance abuse or law involvement, and emancipation from public care or vulnerability do to their ethnicity (e.g. Ethiopian immigrants, Arabs), religiosity or sexual identity. The definition of at-risk young adults is wide and includes different groups such as young adults under public care, young adults who suffered abuse and neglect, and those who are involved with the law, substance abuse or experience

homelessness. Other reasons of risk also include young adults who are at risk due to their ethnicity, such as immigrants, and those in transition between societies, including asylum seekers and LGBTQ youth (Katan, 2009; Reuven & Turgeman, 2015).

Earlier studies that focused on factors that can lead to better outcomes among at-risk young adults emphasised the importance of mentoring relationships as a promising approach for buffering against poor life course outcomes (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2011; Munson & McMillen, 2009). ‘Natural mentoring’ is used to describe an older, experienced non-parental person, whom youth self-select from their existing social networks (e.g., school staff, neighbours, adult relatives) (Cavell, Meehan, Heffer, & Holladay, 2002). Mentoring relationships were found as leading to better social, cognitive and affective outcomes (Eby, Allen, Evans, & DuBois, 2008; Goldner & Mayseless, 2009). Although natural mentoring relationships develop in an informal manner, they may be created and fostered formally through mentoring programs, assigned mentors, or by professionals (Greeson, 2013; Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). As a result, programs that seek to establish mentoring relationships between at-risk youth and non-parental adults are increasingly being employed with the goal of improving outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007), and have been shown to be effective in promoting positive youth outcomes (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Earlier meta-analysis evaluations (e.g., Debois et al., 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011) indicate that formal mentoring can have a positive impact on youths’ outcomes, including socio-emotional status (e.g., Cavell et al., 2002), academic achievements (e.g., Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000), and behavioural status (e.g., Cavell, Elledge, Malcolm, Faith, & Hughes, 2009).

Although few earlier studies explored the role of mentoring relationships in the transition to adulthood of at-risk young people (Author, 2016a; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016), they focused mainly on the young adults’ perspectives. Literature is scarce with regard to the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentors. Also, the substantial literature on mentoring relationships concentrates mainly in mentoring children and adolescents rather than emerging adults. Therefore, this exploratory study examines the barriers and challenges mentors have in working with at-risk young adults (18–25) and their needs in supporting them during the transition to adulthood. Exploring the challenges of the mentors of at-risk young adults is important because it can shed light on factors and processes that help to establish successful mentoring relationships, especially with young people who experience difficulties in trusting professional adult figures. In addition, professional mentoring relationships are possibly an important source of support for young people who enter emerging adulthood without their families’ emotional and concrete support (Benbenishty, Schiff, 2009). Therefore, understanding these mentors’ challenges and needs could allow us to better support these vulnerable young adults during emerging adulthood, and could inform mentoring programs how to better support their mentors in their work.

## **Professional mentoring of at-risk youth**

Organised and professional mentoring involves volunteers or paid adults who usually mentor their mentees for a defined period, aiming to promote their outcomes in different areas and compensate for a lack of appropriate role models (DuBois &

Silverthorn, 2005). Earlier studies focused on mentoring programs for children and adolescents and their effect on their academic, social and emotional outcomes. The literature indicates that this type of intervention is generally a moderately effective way to promote development in these areas. For example, Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, and DuBois (2008) in their systematic review found that mentoring is associated with a wide range of favourable behavioural, motivational and health-related outcomes.

Later research focused on identifying the factors and processes that could lead to these good mentoring outcomes. Mainly the quality of the mentoring relationship, the mentors' and mentees' characteristics, and the mechanisms with which they work to lead to positive development and change (Karcher, Nakkula & Harris 2005; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005; Sulimani-Aidan, 2016, 2018). In her model, Rhodes et al. (2005) suggested that a mentor-mentee relationship bond is formed through trust, empathy and mutual benefit, which eventually produce improvements in the youth's socio-emotional, cognitive, and identity development. According to this model, mentors who offer companionship and genuine support may help change the negative views the adolescents have about themselves and their relationships with others. Also, providing enrichment activities and counselling can contribute to their development in different life areas. Rhodes also emphasised the role of the mentor as a role model for the youth. Spencer (2006), in her studies on the mutual perceptions of mentors and mentees, found that the deepening of the initial relationship between mentor and mentee is facilitated by the mentor's ability to share authentic feelings and understand reality from the mentee's standpoint, as well as to form cooperation and partnership. Author (2016a) found that professional mentors who were available to the youth, familiar with their personal background, and provided guidance and support from a non-judgmental approach, were able to establish meaningful relationships with them.

A successful adjustment to adulthood depends on both practical resources (e.g., concrete support, exercising rights) and emotional resources (e.g., support, counselling) that are limited among vulnerable young people. The presence of a professional mentor has the potential to fulfill some of these resources and help these young people cope more effectively with the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood; this, in turn, might lead eventually to better outcomes in adult life (Author, 2016b). Nevertheless, mentoring at-risk young people could be a challenging task due to the different needs of these young people, their various characteristics and background. The current paper addresses this issue through the perspective of the mentors themselves.

## Research goals

This exploratory study examines the challenges caseworkers face in trying to establish meaningful and promotive relationships with at-risk young adults and their needs in mentoring. This information contributes to the knowledge of the transition to adult life among vulnerable young people and could inform mentoring programs and services targeted at at-risk youth and support their mentors and young adults in the crucial and challenging period of emerging adulthood. Therefore, the research questions are:

- (1) What are the challenges in mentoring at-risk young adults?
- (2) What are the mentors' needs in mentoring vulnerable young people during emerging adulthood?

## Methods

### Participants

The sample included 30 caseworkers who mentor at-risk young adults between the ages 18 and 25 from 20 at risk youth and young adult organisations throughout Israel. Most of the participants were women (70%) with Bachelors degrees, mainly in the fields of social science and social work. Half of them (51%) had mentored young adults for 2 years or more. The case workers worked in different organisations aiming to help young adults in various risk circumstances, including care leavers, youth who lack family backing, young adults with addiction problems, and at-risk young women (Table 1).

### Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the researcher's university. The interviews took place in a national learning centre for children and youth at risk, where practitioners occasionally visit to strengthen their knowledge and skills in working with vulnerable populations through professional courses. Two researchers approached all the mentors who work with at-risk young adults and gave them an explanation of the study goals and asked for their consent to participate in the study. Of the 35 caseworkers, five refused to participate in the study. The 30 mentors who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study were interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately 25 min.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, consisting of open-ended questions on the challenges of working with at-risk young adults. First, the mentors were interviewed about their personal information (age, position, length of mentoring period, characteristics of the young adults they mentor). Second, the mentors were asked to describe the difficulties, barriers and challenges in mentoring at-risk young adults. Finally, they were asked about their own needs in mentoring the young people during the period of emerging adulthood. The questions were as follows: 1. What are

**Table 1.** Case workers' demographics (N = 30).

Variable	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	9	30%
Female	21	70%
<i>Education</i>		
M.A	7	23%
B.A	18	60%
High school diploma	5	17%
<i>Length of mentoring</i>		
Up to 1 year	15	50%
2–3 years	8	27%
3-more	7	23%
<i>Field of education</i>		
Social work	12	40%
Education	6	20%
Other fields (e.g., sociology)	12	40%
<i>Organization's main goal</i>		
Supervised apartment	11	37%
Academic and career support	6	20%
Others (asylum seekers, ultra-Orthodox)	13	43%

the challenges you are facing in your work as a mentor of at-risk young adults? 2. What are your own needs in mentoring at-risk young adults? 3. What could help you better support these young people during their transition to adulthood?

### **Data analysis**

The main method used to analyse the caseworks' interviews was theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theoretical thematic analysis is used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. Using this analysis allowed the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as in the area of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2001; Arnett, 2007) and mentoring models (Ahrens et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2005). Three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher), who interpreted the mentors' answers and extracted central themes that expressed their perceptions of mentoring at-risk young adults, performed the analysis. The readers employed an incident-by-incident coding technique in which every portion of the interview transcript was read and coded for important themes. A focused coding process, during which the incident codes were reread and analysed to identify larger themes (Charmaz, 2006), followed. During these phases, the readers analysed the interviews and then met to discuss themes and resolve any discrepancies by discussion. Finally, we further checked the validity of the findings by sending a written report describing the study findings to the participants and integrating their feedback into the data analysis.

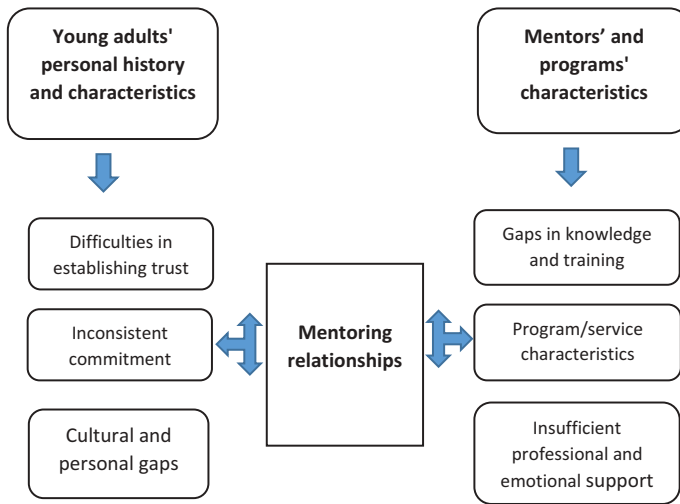
## **Results**

### **Challenges in mentoring at-risk young people**

The mentors' descriptions of their challenges in mentoring at-risk young people revealed two major themes. The first theme included challenges related to the young adults' personal history and characteristics and included three subthemes: 1. Difficulties in establishing trust; 2. Inconsistent commitment and persistence; 3. Cultural and personal gaps in the mentoring relationship. The second major theme related to the mentors' speciality within their own services including: 1. Knowledge and training; 2. The service/program characteristics (Figure 1).

#### **Challenges related to the young adults' personal history and characteristics**

*Difficulties in establishing trust.* The mentors highlighted the challenging task of establishing relationships of trust and confidence with the young adults. They described feelings of suspicion, skepticism, resistance and difficulty to open up to them as the young adults' mentors. The mentors explained these feeling of mistrust were rooted in these young people's difficult and painful history both with their attachment figures and with professionals and the official systems they encountered (e.g., care system, social services). This central theme was illustrated by one of the mentors who works with at-risk young adults in a program for vocational training: 'Breaking the barrier of trust is the hardest and most complicated part. They (the young adults) had so many disappointments, and they do not believe that you will be here for them tomorrow. [You have to] fight for them, look for them if they vanish. It is the first and most important



**Figure 1.** Challenges and needs in mentoring at-risk young people.

thing. It is one of the most difficult barriers but the most critical way to establish meaningful relationships with them.'

***Inconsistency in commitment.*** From the mentors' descriptions, it was evident that the young adults they mentored were experiencing difficulties in committing to and persisting with the mentoring process. Those shifts in their motivation within the mentoring process are connected to their low self-esteem and lack of self-belief in their value, skills and potential. Their low self-efficacy is also connected to their traumatic history, negative life experiences, poor achievement, and lack of a safety net that allows them to dare to reach their goals. All of these lead to fear of failure and low to non-existent belief in their ability to succeed within the mentoring process. One of the mentors who works with young adults who left their religious community explained: 'Their personal background is experienced as a personal failure. That leads to a very poor start and therefore their self-esteem is very low, and they don't believe in themselves. I believe that this causes them to be less motivated and to be unstable emotionally.'

***Cultural and personal gaps in the mentoring relationship.*** This theme emerges as one of the barriers in working with at-risk young adults, especially when there are substantial gaps between the mentor and the young person. The mentors in this study described the many differences between them and the young people in terms of their social, personal and cultural values. These differences made it difficult for them to reach out to these young people and for the young people to feel that their mentors understand and accept them. Some of the mentors emphasised the gaps in religiosity (e.g. working with young adults who left their religious community); sexual orientation (e.g. working with young adults from the LGBT community) and ethnicity (e.g. working with young adult immigrants). As one of the caseworkers who works with young adults in a supervision apartment said: 'The challenge is to understand the culture they come from, their family, their complex background. It is hard to work on a stable relationship

that is designed specifically for these young persons without the understanding of their social and personal history.’

### ***Challenges related to the mentors’ speciality and the service features***

#### ***The service/program characteristics***

The programs’ working model and features were identified by the mentors in some cases as a barrier to their effective work with the young adults. These aspects included the limited time provided to mentor the young adults, the geographical distance between the service and the young adults’ place of residence, and the mentors’ work load. One of the mentors that works in a program aiming to strengthen the social mobility of at-risk young adults emphasised the difficulty to form meaningful relationship in a short time: ‘The time you have to mentor these young adults is very focused. In our program, we have only 7 months with them and then they go back to their lives, and it’s very hard to keep in touch. These young people find it very hard to trust others so it takes time to build trust and work with them fast.’ Another mentor who works with at-risk young people in an employment program mentioned the difficulty to address their differential needs: ‘There are organisational constraints that affect the quality of work. One worker has many roles and it affects the quality of the mentoring process because it limits the opportunity to meet the young adult and to strengthen the relationship. The program wants us to mentor too many young adults at the same time... focusing on quantity rather than quality. But some young people need more extensive counseling.’

#### ***Gaps in knowledge and training***

This theme emerged both with regards to the mentors’ own speciality and training and the knowledge they needed to meet the young adults’ needs effectively. The mentors described the limited knowledge they had with regards to different services and rights of these young people, especially in light of their heterogeneity. In other cases, the mentors focused on the lack of appropriate training within the services, and as a result difficulties in helping the young adults with the various tasks in different areas of their lives.

### ***What do mentors need to work effectively with at-risk young adults?***

#### ***Broad, current and interactive knowledge***

This need was dominant in the mentors’ answers. Having one place that integrates all the information and resources young people need in transition to adulthood could help effectively negotiate the differential needs of the young adults in various life areas. The mentors indicated that during their work they tried to help the young adults both with concrete needs and emotional needs according to their abilities and goals. More knowledge in core areas of adult life such as housing, educational and occupational possibilities was needed. They also needed information regarding these young peoples’ rights, especially to help them as their mentors to work directly with official/government offices that are usually difficult for the young people to approach due to bureaucracy and difficulties in accessibility. In this regard, mentors also mentioned their need to work in collaboration with other services and programs for at-risk young adults to exchange professional knowledge. As one of the mentors who works with young adults

who left care explained: ‘The most important thing is the connection between the organisations. Each service works with different young adults and specialises in a special area. I think that it is important to share the information and the tools that each of us has for mutual learning.’

### ***Ongoing training and support***

The mentors felt they needed more training to understand these young people’s characteristics and the challenges of that period in their lives. They cited profound and ongoing training about the period of emerging adulthood and what it holds – especially for at-risk young adults – as their greatest need. Ongoing support for them as mentors was also a central need, both in order to prevent burnout and in recognition of their intense emotional investment in their work. They described the harsh and complicated life stories of the young adults they worked with and their own emotional involvement in these vulnerable young peoples’ lives: ‘The workers sometimes work alone and need to be supported and listened to. The person who helped me the most was the psychologist in our organisation’ (a mentor who works in a volunteering project). Another mentor who works in a supervision apartment said: ‘It is very important to work in a team, together. To feel that the service backs you up. The team meetings and counselling... sharing the situation and dilemmas in your work with your colleagues and managers helps you cope better. It’s very very important! This way you feel that you are not coping alone with the situations these young people struggle with every day.’

## **Discussion and implications for practice**

At-risk young adults in transition to adulthood enter this complicated and important period of their life with very little concrete support and low emotional and practical support from their families (Benbenishty, & Schiff, 2009). Therefore, professional mentoring relationships could be an important source of support for them during emerging adulthood. The aim of this exploratory study was to examine the barriers and challenges mentors have in working with at-risk young adults and their needs to support these young people effectively. The study suggests that mentoring at-risk young adults holds many challenges for the mentors, especially in terms of establishing relationships that are built on trust and consistency.

### ***Challenges and possible solutions***

#### ***Organisationally-related challenges***

In some cases, mentors identified the program’s working model or service characteristics as barriers to working effectively with the young adults. These aspects included the limited time provided to mentor the young adults, the accessibility of the service to the young adults, and their own work load. The importance of having a substantial amount of time to establish meaningful relationship with at-risk youth was discussed in earlier studies. Those highlighted the period of time that is needed to lead and strengthen positive outcomes. For example, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that positive effects on youth outcomes become progressively stronger when relationships persist

for longer periods of time. The current study strengthens this finding and adds additional aspects within the mentoring program that are needed to promote meaningful and beneficial relationships. Programs for at-risk young adults must consider the gradual development of these relationships and the mentors' exceeding investment, and take them into account with regards to the length of the program and the number of young people the mentor works with.

Another challenge of the mentors with respect to their service or program was their limited knowledge about the young peoples' rights and services in different life areas including: housing, education and employment. The need for appropriate and tailored training within the services according to the young peoples' circumstances and characteristic is highly important in the period of emerging adulthood. In this period, the young people must take on more adult roles and responsibilities, explore participation in social networks, and pursue employment opportunities and additional education (McCabe & Barnett, 2000; Seginer, 2008). Their choices during this period can have a significant effect on their life as adults. At-risk young adults in many cases have to deal with more domains during this period including their housing arrangements, relationships with their family members, and emotional lability (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Therefore, providing mentors with all the necessary information they need to counsel the young adults with regards to their possibilities and rights is very important at this stage.

The organisation and program in which the mentoring relationships take place plays a big role because of the formal nature of the mentoring process. Unlike natural mentors who have a spontaneous and independent relationship with their mentee, mentors who work with young adults within a formal program are influenced by the characteristics of the organisation, its goals and available resources. These aspects might impact the quality of the relationships. Mentors in this study mentioned several aspects that might get in their way of forming meaningful relationships with the young adults due to the organisation's characteristics and aspirations. In addition to their work load, limited time and knowledge, they highlighted the insufficient training and support in dealing effectively with the challenging task of meeting these young people's concrete and emotional needs. All of these aspects affect the quality of the relationships both directly and indirectly by leading to a sense of burnout and elevated stress, aspects that were also common among staff who work intensively with at-risk youth (Grupper & Romi, 2011). The need for ongoing training and support is also important because mentors often have romanticised ideas about saving at-risk youth. However, the harsh realities of vulnerable youth with difficult life circumstances might lead to disappointment and frustration (Spencer, 2007). Therefore, while realising that the quality of mentoring relationships is one of the most important components in leading to change in the young adults' lives, programs must take into account the importance of the quality of training and the need for supporting staff against burnout.

### ***Challenges of mentoring relationships***

Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that the mentoring relationship is more likely to last longer with a higher quality relationship. These relationships are likely to grow in a positive manner if the mentee and mentor report closeness with each other (DuBois &

Neville, 1997; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). One of the barriers that the mentors in this study reported that might decrease their ability to become closer to the young adults had to do with the young adults' suspicion and mistrust, which are rooted in their former attachment figures and negative past experiences with professionals. This finding could be explained by the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), which posits that attachment to a caregiver is a basic and biological need of every human being. Thus, children's attachment to the primary caregiver at an early age affects their relationships during their life course with authority figures, friends, and intimate partners. Bowlby theorised that children's early attachment to their primary care giver allows them to build up expectations in the form of an internalised representation or 'working model' of relationships and the way they perceive and trust their environment. Scholars (Bowlby, 1988; Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001) have argued that in extreme cases, such as maltreatment and acute neglect, lack of attachment relationships are associated with emotional and cognitive development and may have far-reaching consequences that might last into adulthood. However, Attachment Theory also posits that several opportunities exist to change the 'impaired' working model over time. These possibilities include a significant life-changing experience, such as an experience of a secure intimate relationship. Thus, for at risk youth, a positive and meaningful figure, such as a mentor, may compensate for earlier disadvantaged attachment relationships (Howes et al., 1999; Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001). Therefore, in order to cope successfully with this challenge, one of the implication is to design longer mentoring programs that allow enough time for these relationships to overcome this barrier and deepen.

Another barrier that is connected to the mentors' possibility to establish meaningful relationships and closeness with the young adults relates to the gaps in their cultural and personal characteristics and history. Those differences and gaps relate to immanent aspects of identity including: religion, sexual orientation and ethnicity. This aspect was also found in earlier studies that focused on mentoring relationships from the youths' perspectives (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008; Author, 2016a). It emphasises the youths' ability to relate more easily to someone they believe can understand their situation and with whom they can therefore share openly their feelings and unique stories via joint life stories and characteristics. Also, it is possible that mentors that share mutual history and characteristics with the young adults make it easier for their mentees to perceive them as role models – as people who overcame difficulties and coped successfully with challenges similar to their own. Therefore, it is not surprising that this component is also central in the mentors' descriptions. Other mentoring researchers also highlighted the difficulty for mentors to sensitively manage issues that arise from the racial and socioeconomic differences that commonly exist between themselves and their mentees (Spencer, 2007).

Finally, the young adults' shifts in motivation within the mentoring process emerged as one of the complex challenges mentors deal with when working with at-risk young adults. They might affect the possibility to achieve long-range goals because of the difficulties in committing to and persisting with the mentoring process. This study adds this aspect to the current literature on mentoring relationships and highlights this barrier as an additional challenge that relates to mentoring at-risk young adults. This theme can also explain why mentoring relationships among at-risk youth are less consistent with regard to benefits when compared with other populations of youth (Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010).

## Limitations and future studies

This study aimed to provide important new information about the challenges of mentoring at-risk young adults and their mentors' needs. Despite its contribution, as an exploratory study it has some limitations that should be noted. First, the study's findings represent the common challenges and needs of caseworkers from different organisations who work with at-risk young adults with no distinction between different types of risks. Although mentoring this population shares many similarities, future studies should examine whether there are differences in mentoring young adults from various risk circumstances. Secondly, the study included caseworkers who at that time were participating in a course aiming to strengthen their knowledge and skills in working with vulnerable populations in a national learning centre for children and youth at risk. It is possible that this specific sample emphasised certain aspects, and that other caseworkers might add other challenges and needs according to their experience, expertise and the type of young adults they work with. Finally, this study focused only on the perspectives of the mentors with regards to their barriers and needs. Examining both mentors' and young adults' perspectives regarding both their challenges and needs and their positive and strengthening experience during the mentoring process could present a much wider and clearer picture with regards to mentoring relationships in the challenging period of emerging adulthood.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Yafit Sulimani-Aidan* is a Professor at Tel Aviv University, Bob Shapell School of Social Work. Research topics: At risk youth; Adolescents in care; Care leavers, Transition to adulthood, Resilience, Mentoring, Future Expectations.

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