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# 'If we want, they help us in any way': how 'unaccompanied refugee minors' experience mentoring relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Little is known about the growing phenomenon of 'mentorship for "unaccompanied refugee minors"'. This article looks into one serious gap, based on a case study in Austria, asking: How do these young people, most of them seeking asylum, represent relationships in a mentorship programme? Here, youth mentoring is understood as a community-based form of social intervention carried out by an organisation that connects trained adult volunteers with young people. The findings from two multilingual group interviews focus on various dimensions of social support and social capital, e.g. with regard to settling in and life course transitions. Reacting to calls for methodological reflection in studies on the refugee experience, the article presents in detail the setting and approach, which partly built on the concept of the 'tripled Otherness of "unaccompanied minors"'. An analysis of their narrations is discussed against the wider context, particularly that of systematic discrimination by welfare agencies and efforts by various actors to rearrange URMs' differential inclusion. The conclusion proposes that research should better reflect the political dimension in mentoring for marginalised populations. It argues that the potential of such programmes should be tapped to develop progressive protection arrangements extending beyond the limits of the welfarist nation state.

## KEYWORDS

Mentoring; unaccompanied minors; social support and social capital; group discussion; relationships

## 1. Introduction

Mentorship for immigrant populations and marginalised youth has been a popular means of social intervention for some time in 'Western' countries. Mentorship programmes have various motives and take various forms (for an overview see DuBois & Karcher, 2014). Some are intended to cover a wide range of social support and social network functions. Youth mentorship is often based on the assumption that particular people lack resources or adequate conditions for their personal development, their societal integration or social participation (e.g. Hudson, 2013; Avery, 2011). This assessment leans on a social problematisation of their individual situation and behaviour or their marginalised social positioning. Roughly outlined, in these cases a programme matches a local, often 'established' middle-class adult volunteer (the mentor) with a previously unknown person (the mentee) in a one-to-one relationship. One form of this is mentorship for 'unaccompanied refugee minors', 'URMs' for short, often building on adult volunteers and civic solidarity.

Due to the increasing number of young people in Europe who have been defined as URMs by state and social organisations at some stage in their life, such programmes have grown

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enormously. What makes mentoring for URMs a case for research in social work is that many programmes are based on the idea that existing, professionally and institutionally framed relationships (e.g. in care, in school, etc.) and other, 'private' relationships do not provide the quality and support that is needed for substantial social participation and desirable development. However, little is known in social science about the phenomenon of 'mentorship for URMs' (but for Austria, see Scheibelhofer, 2019). More importantly, there is a serious lack of knowledge on how these young people experience and represent relationships that are connected to mentoring activities. Against this background, this article presents findings from two group interviews with young people who participated in a pilot programme providing 'godparents for URMs'. The investigation was part of an encompassing, explorative case study in an Austrian region (Raithelhuber, 2018, 2019a).

In the following, I characterise key aspects of the state of the art in youth mentoring for URMs and research on how URMs perceive their social relationships, highlighting gaps. The question, context and design of the underlying investigation are then outlined, with a particular focus on the research setting. Having sketched the theory and methodology for our two group interviews, I present and discuss selected findings. In the methodological discussion I critically ask if the findings could facilitate research into the progressive production of knowledge on or with URMs – and if so, how. Finally, I outline how our insights can be used to develop related programmes at the intersection of public responsibility, self-organisation and refugee protection through civil society action.

## **2. State of the art on youth mentoring and URMs' experiences**

The concept of mentoring covers many notions. In this article, it refers to a formal programme in which two people, previously strangers, are 'matched' to form a relationship with regular face-to-face contact. On the one hand, there is a mentor within a more consolidated, more resourceful and possibly more powerful position; on the other hand, there is a mentee, who is portrayed as needier or less experienced (Keller & Pryce, 2010).

### **2.1. Studies on young refugees as mentees: research gaps**

The mentoring literature has focused on 'immigrant and refugee youth' (Birman & Morland, 2014) or 'special populations', such as young people in public care (e.g. Powers et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, Melkman, & Hellman, 2019) or in marginalised living conditions (Kanchewa, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2017). However, what Behnia stated more than 10 years ago still holds good: 'Despite its important contribution to refugees' adjustment to a new society, very little is known about befriending programmes' (Behnia, 2007, p. 3). Generally, very few studies on mentoring carry out in-depth research based on qualitative methods (Keller & Pryce, 2010, p. 38). Mainstream, mostly quantitative research often highlights factors for 'success'. In turn, qualitative studies emphasise the significance of relationships and how people perceive each other (Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, Walsh, & Drew, 2017). An overview of the state of the art (Raithelhuber, 2019a) shows that we know little about the different social and organisational practices and symbolic representations that are involved, or the subjectivities and positionalities that people are able or forced to take up in the context of these mentorship programmes. Likewise, we do not yet have sufficient knowledge on how the main actors make sense of their involvement, e.g. against the background of their biographical and social context, how mentors and mentees experience these relationships, and how all of this impacts on developments and orientations. These serious shortcomings exist alongside assessments in practice and in studies based on evaluation and evidence praising the positive impact of mentorship programmes for young people (Britner, Randall, & Ahrens, 2014) and refugees (for Austria see Blecha, 2012, pp. 59–61).

## 2.2. Research on how URM<sub>s</sub> experience social relationships: research gaps

In recent years, URM<sub>s</sub>' *experiences* have been investigated increasingly. This includes studies on their placement in foster care (Sirriyeh, 2013; Bates et al., 2005) and in residential care (e.g. Kaukko & Wernejsjö, 2017; Söderqvist, Sjöblom, & Bülow, 2016), as well as in care and protection institutions in the context of (forced) re-migration and deportation (e.g. Thompson, Torres, Swanson, Blue, & Hernández Hernández, 2019; Dietrich, 2015; Robinson & Williams, 2015). Likewise, aspects related to life course transitions have been highlighted in empirical studies (Trott, 2018a; Ghaemina, Ghorashi, & Crul, 2017) or in conceptual papers (Kohli, 2014). In this overall context, only a few studies have also looked into how URM<sub>s</sub> perceive their personal relationships (but see Wiseman, 2016; Denov & Bryan, 2014). Likewise, there is little knowledge on how they themselves shape and experience their social networks, and how their relationships connect to their social capital in its various dimensions and functions, e.g. with regard to challenges at different stages of arrival and settling into the new context (see Eriksson, Wimelius, & Ghazinour, 2018, pp. 4–6).

Many studies reveal that contact with the majority society is shaped by the institutional contexts in which URM<sub>s</sub> are placed. For example, Trott (2018b) showed in her ethnography on URM<sub>s</sub> in a reception centre in South Tyrol, Italy, that contact with 'others' was often restricted to staff and their social networks (e.g. friends). Connections, including to professionals, have the potential to mediate access to particular resources (including information) and foster a sense of belonging. However, they risk being disrupted by subsequent, sometimes forced movements, as URM<sub>s</sub> often confront more complex, multiplied and accelerated transitions. To give but one example, this is the case when people leave school or have to exit a care institution, e.g. when coming of age. Related impacts are well known from studies on young care leavers (for Austria see Groinig, Hagleitner, Maran, & Sting, 2019).

Some studies focus on how young, independent cross-border movers seeking protection as refugees generally experience both institutionally mediated and 'private' relationships and how they make sense of them under the given circumstances. These studies vary widely in terms of methodology and quality. For example, Bates et al. (2005) employed focus groups to look into how Sudanese refugee youth resettled to the US perceived their foster families. The investigation was designed to produce evidence on 'successes and challenges of the placement' (p. 632). Instead of reconstructing in a fundamental manner how the young people made sense of these relationships, and what kind of collective sense-making was documented in these group talks, in my view the findings tend to psychologise and pathologise the interview partners (see e.g. Bates et al., 2005, p. 643). Moreover, it is hard to transfer the results to the given case: the resettled youth most likely did *not* face the same adversities as URM<sub>s</sub> *seeking* asylum, who are threatened by deportation until they receive a positive decision on their case.

A well theorised, qualitative study by Sirriyeh (2013) provides findings on how URM<sub>s</sub> perceive their foster parents in the UK. Notably, it focuses on how this allows URM<sub>s</sub> to form different senses of belonging and build different types of social capital. By analysing narrated family practices, the study derives three 'models' of relationship categorisations: 'like-family', 'guest' and 'lodger'. Sirriyeh highlights various aspects linked to life course transitions, besides many more, ordinary family practices that 'made' the young refugees see themselves as part of a family life and network. One relevant finding for this article was related by youth in 'like-family' relationships: their foster parents also supported them in their asylum claims and actively helped get them access to educational resources (Sirriyeh, 2013, pp. 11–12).

These findings are complemented by insights from Sweden. Eriksson et al. (2018) investigated how current and former inhabitants of a reception centre for URM<sub>s</sub> experienced and assessed proximate members of their social network: professional care staff, like-ethnic friends and 'Swedes'. Forging successful contacts with 'ordinary' members of society, i.e. representatives of the local majority population who could subsequently turn into 'gate-keepers', seemed to depend on the young refugees adopting a number of strategies. Hence, in the eyes of their interviewees,

establishing themselves in Swedish society (e.g. being able to practise the local language or to find a job), including the pace at which this was possible, was highly connected to successful relationship-building with locals. However, the study did not focus on (formal) youth mentorship. In contrast to our study, it deliberately excluded *asylum-seeking* young people from the sample, interviewing only those with a secure status.

### 2.3. Overall research gap

It is safe to say that no scientific investigation whatsoever has yet looked at how URMs make sense of mentoring programmes and of the relationships they produce. Likewise, in refugee studies, childhood studies and social work, very few qualitative investigations have looked at youth mentoring or befriending programmes for URMs at all. This is particularly true regarding mentees in limbo, i.e. minor asylum claimants.

## 3. Research question and design

Building on the state of the art, the fundamental, open-ended question must be asked of how young people within such schemes perceive their relationships and make sense of mentoring. This article gives an answer to this broad question, picking out selected results from an explorative in-depth qualitative investigation into a youth mentoring programme for URMs in Austria, starting in 2015, the ‘long summer of migration’ in Europe (Raithelhuber, 2019a).

Initially, the organisation that started the pilot programme ‘godparenthoods for URMs’, an official, semi-independent ombuds-agency for child protection, called upon the author to do an evaluation, but without providing notable funding. Hence, the principal investigator recruited a team of four voluntary, highly motivated young female researchers. The ombuds-agency was promised a research report for internal use, delivered in 2017. The principal investigator decided to collect data and use methodologies that also allowed for an academic output.

The phenomenon under observation in this article shares characteristics of youth mentoring as ‘a community based form of intervention that can reach out to vulnerable young people’ (Philip, 2008, p. 19). It too is a mentoring programme model that deploys an adult volunteer mentor with a general aim: to ‘support and enable mentee to deal and cope with complex personal issues’ (Busse, Campbell, & Kipping, 2018, p. 409). In our overall, complex research project, one sub-study looked at how the young mentees experienced their mentoring relationships. This particular paper builds on data from two group interviews.

### 3.1. Research context

Our long-term case study started at a time when events were coming thick and fast. Up to 10,000 refugees were passing through the Austrian city every day on their way to other European countries. In 2015 alone, more than 8000 young refugees claimed asylum as minors in Austria (population: approx. 9 million). One main point of critique on placements for URMs in public care in Austria is that URMs over 14 are, de facto, institutionalised outside of regular care in facilities which I shall term ‘special accommodation units’. URMs remain within the basic welfare support scheme for refugees ‘Grundversorgung’ as long as they have not attained ‘first-class’ asylum status. Simply put, Austria has long had a two-class system in public care: on the one hand ‘regular’ out-of-home care in child and youth welfare (group homes, semi-independent housing or foster families) and on the other hand ‘irregular’ care for URMs between 14 and 18 without full asylum status, housed in special accommodation units (for an explanation of the refugee management and asylum system in Austria, see Bassermann & Spiegelfeld, 2018; Raithelhuber, 2019b; UNHCR Österreich, 2018). Against the background of national and international law, e.g. the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, various legal opinion-makers and ombuds-organisations have clearly identified this as

an illegal and inappropriate practice in youth welfare (e.g. Ganner, Jicha, & Weber, 2016; Die Kinder- und Jugendanwaltschaften, 2015). A recent report on URM in Austria issued by the International Organization for Migration concludes:

On the whole, the transition to adulthood is seen as a challenge. ... Austria has no specific nationwide measures in the areas of care and integration that are designed to prepare unaccompanied minors for the transition to adulthood. (Bassermann & Spiegelfeld, 2018, pp. 33–34)

### **3.2. The sample for the two group interviews with mentees**

At the time of the data collection in 2016, most of our interviewees were still living in 'special accommodation units'. Most had already been in the country for a year or longer in various camps. They had already gone through a high number of institutional transitions and geographical moves in the country compared to 'local' youth, including those living outside of their family of origin. A few former URMs had already left these institutions when they turned 18 and been immediately placed in a bigger camp for adults, often outside the cities and with even less support. All of the informants were male (group interview 1:  $N = 10$ ; group interview 2:  $N = 8$ ); none lived on their own at the time. The vast majority were officially considered to have Afghan citizenship, while a sizeable group had a background in Syria and Somalia. Some were enrolled in regular secondary school. Almost all interviewees were still claiming asylum. A 'negative' response was most likely at that time and place, particularly for those officially holding Afghan nationality. According to hearsay amongst refugees and their supporters, a positive or negative decision on a claim – the latter leading to subsequent deportation – depended to some degree on a refugee's ability to assert his or her social attachment to Austria or prove 'integration'. All of this has to be considered in light of the absurd fact that URMs were constantly discriminated against by the (supposedly protecting) nation state and held in temporal, spatial, social and legal limbo.

### **3.3. The research setting of the multilingual group interviews and ethics**

In a preparatory step, we met with some of the young people on the agency's waiting list and with staff during two 'warming up' events (indoor climbing and bowling). Reflecting on these experiences, we opted against individual interviews and chose a multilingual group interview within a youth-friendly, attractive socio-cultural event. The first reason for this was that this atmosphere more closely reflected both *their* everyday realities and *ours*. Several team members used multiple languages on a daily basis and one had even fled Afghanistan as a child. Second, given that most of the young men still had ongoing asylum procedures, we did not want our data collection to be mistaken for an interrogation. Third, we needed to guarantee their active participation and ensure it was voluntary and uncoerced. Fourth, we wanted to produce high-quality data reflecting a range of experiences and views. To sum up, pragmatic, ethical and methodological reasons called for data collection in a group setting embedded in socio-cultural activities.

Compared to research in the field, our approach was probably unique. In studies on URMs, professional carers often function as gatekeepers and selectors of interviewees, thus possibly also biasing the sample and the results. In contrast to this, we visited the mentees at their 'home' and invited them to join us and other young participants. We picked those who had at least two months' experience with their mentor. We announced a participative photo shoot and a group interview on their experiences. A fact sheet was handed out in German and languages they were likely to have known previously (i.e. Farsi/Dari, Somali, and Arabic), including information on the voluntary nature of participation. All texts were written in simplified language, with a presentation and picture of each research team member.

On the day of the two stand-alone events we returned, offering each group a lift in our car to the venue, a vacant youth club. We started with a relaxed gathering of up to fifteen people, playing table

soccer, having food and drinks, listening to music from their home countries, dancing and smoking. In addition, a hired photographer from one of the 'countries of origin' offered a stylish photo shoot. One of the research team members served as a translator for Dari. In addition, a refugee media activist was present at both events, who had already received his positive asylum decision years ago. He translated (non-professionally) between German and Somali or Arabic.

During each event, after some hours, everybody was invited to sit together. They were informed once again about the voluntary character of the interview, thus guaranteeing their informed consent. Confidentiality in the use of data was assured, as well as its anonymisation. In the introduction, the principal investigator put the young people in the unique position of 'experts'. We encouraged the young people to talk about notable episodes and to comment on the usability, value and limits of their mentorships (a copy of the guidelines is available in German upon request). Everybody was invited to speak in the language he or she felt most comfortable with. Every single statement during the two hours was translated consecutively into two other languages – e.g. from German to Somali and Dari and back.

All participants were over 14, so they could legally decide on their participation in data collection. We did not ask about the URMs' experiences in their countries of origin, during their flight or their initial reception in Austria. This decision was partly based on ethical concerns. However, the main reason for this was that these aspects were simply not our point of interest. In addition, the group atmosphere of the talk enabled people to take on different roles, e.g. as a listener, speaker, or commentator, thus allowing them to steer their own level and intensity of participation.

### **3.4. Data processing and analysis**

Conversations were transcribed and all non-German parts were translated. As far as possible, translations were cross-checked by a second person (native speaker of the target language), including our subsequent interpretation. The analysis built upon the previous findings on the 'training' of future mentors (see Raithelhuber, 2019a) and, partly, on mentors' sense-making before meeting 'their' young refugee (Raithelhuber, 2019c). Hence, the analysis was sensitive to how the young people categorised themselves and their 'godparents', and how they related to any associated social problematisations.

We loosely followed the methodology of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). In the first round, the transcriptions were worked through line by line, overviewing what was presented in the text. Employing the four-eyes principle, we identified topics through inductive analysis and formulated clusters. Subsequently, some passages were examined more thoroughly, seeking the immanent meaning of what was said and looking at how things were presented and discussed. This was intended to uncover what the young people took for granted to such an extent that they did not need to or were not able to explicate it – particularly for this audience of peers. At the end, the clusters were grouped and formulated as a text, which was then linked to theoretical concepts. This paper mainly focuses on how the young participants represented their mentors and their connectedness as social support and social capital.

## **4. Theoretical and methodological framework**

Refugee studies on encounters with 'others' in countries of transit or arrival have already highlighted many aspects that sometimes also surface in our study: the experience of discrimination and hostility, the role of ethnic communities for social support and social capital, or refugees' perceptions of contacts with authorities, settlement agencies and social services. Social science has rich knowledge as to how this impacts on refugees' sense of belonging and on their chances of settling down or 'integrating' into the new society. Against this, our study did not want to add to these *general* findings, as they are mainly based on data collection on 'adult' refugees. Instead, it yields knowledge on the

perceptions of people living under particular conditions, i.e. as URMs in community-based mentorship, most of them still in the process of claiming asylum or appealing against a negative decision.

However, grouping people in this category requires caution, because it entails three inherent categorisations of ‘them’. Based on post-colonial theory and a political theory of migration and social work, I coined this as the ‘tripled Otherness of “unaccompanied refugee minors”’ (Raithelhuber, 2019b). It provides the background for my later methodological discussion and conclusion (see Sections 7 and 8). Firstly, URMs are constructed as ‘clients’ as they are often in public care and are ‘users’ of social services. The various ways of creating clientness are linked to a dominant mode of subjectivation and shape the contingency of experience. Secondly, URMs are seen as ‘children’, since their minority, which is often invoked, but equally debated, connects them to particular regimes of protection and (im)mobility, and to pedagogical measures, including related norms, expectations and entitlements, all well-known from childhood studies. This mode of subjection can be called ‘child (like)ness’. Thirdly, the figure of the ‘refugee’ includes social, political, and legal constructions which are known as ‘refugeeness’ (Malkki, 1995, p. 506) in the political theory of migration. Refugeeness is the product of a regime predetermining people as an ‘invasive other’ (Ticktin, 2017). It imposes a particular political condition on their experience, as they are measured against the rights and values of those ‘truly’ belonging to the sedentary community, i.e. the ‘natives’ or ‘good citizens’ (Anderson, 2013). To give but one example, Yap, Byrne, and Davidson (2011) showed how refugees used volunteering to create themselves discursively as ‘good citizens’.

All of this implies that ‘tripled Otherness’ extends far into scientific knowledge production. What is more, hegemonic knowledge can turn into a building block for sense-making by URMs themselves, shaping what we describe and examine as ‘their experience’: researchers might come upon these aspects in their material and mistake them for the ‘true refugee voice’.

To sum up, there is an implicit danger of essentialising and individualising findings from studies with or on URMs as knowledge on ‘them’, disconnected from ‘us’. Lately, methodological contributions in the field of research on refugee children have outlined a number of issues which call for heightened reflection (e.g. Trujillo, 2017; Eastmond & Ascher, 2011; Malkki, 2010 – for refugees in general see Sigona, 2014). To respond adequately, our research leaning on social constructionist methodology (see Eastmond, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) paid attention to the proximate and distant circumstances under which narration takes place – ranging from current happenings to the above described ‘tripled Otherness’. All of them shape the narratability of *all* people involved.

## 5. Findings: mentoring relationships as social support and social capital

In our internal research report given to the agency which piloted the new scheme, we highlight how the young people perceived the initial phase of the new relationships and how they positioned and described their ‘godparents’ and themselves, e.g. with regard to being, or being treated as, a foreigner, refugee and someone in need of support. Another topical cluster describes their ideas on respect and equality in their relationship with mentors, while also unveiling how the mentees characterised their match and imagined mentors’ motivations. Last but not least, the young people brought up issues of reciprocity in the construction of relationships and their strategies for dealing with perceived imbalance, as well as limits and ‘no-goes’. Relating to the selected topics in the above description of the state of the art, I focus below on how the young interviewees experienced their mentors (and mentoring functions) as social support and an enhancement of their social capital, as this made up a large proportion of our findings.

### 5.1. Mentoring as a way to establish social contacts

Many young people described contact with the ‘godparents’, and even just knowing that the relationship existed, as fundamentally beneficial and supportive. This can be seen from comments that the



relationship and contact improved their inner wellbeing, and that they would recommend a relationship of this kind to friends.

The young people reported this kind of relationship as having a series of functions, and their comments show how they experienced and judged them. For example, in their own views, the godparents enabled them to get to know people for the first time – that is, totally ‘normal’ people. The godparents also helped them meet other people, such as their relations or friends. The interpreter for Arabic translates what the youth sitting beside him whispers:

Yes, so he says that until now he didn’t know any Austrians and so he visits this family twice a week (...) (GI 1, lines 265–266)

Omed, one of the few interviewees to have received a positive decision on his asylum claim, answered the question of what he did with the godparents as follows:

If we want, they help us in any way. You have to talk properly, for example, I want a flat, and they help me find one. Once or twice a week we go to play. Everything they plan, they ask me. I’m a Moslem, they allow me to pray in their house, they cook halal for me and their own food separately. If they go to visit their sister they take me with them, and they introduce us to other people. (Translation from Dari, GI 1, lines 212–221).

## 5.2. Enhancing communication skills by learning German

Many young people mentioned that they learned German with their godparents, or through them. Language also represents a means of communicating and coming into contact with the majority society, ‘Austria’, and the people and institutions that belong to it. It should be noted that, as many of the young people saw it, they had been in Austria for months, some for years, *before* being given such opportunities to learn the language and communicate thanks to the mentors. Some considered this as central to taking further steps in education, training and employment. Jalil described these possibilities as exclusive:

Because of German; it is also very good for us to speak German because we don’t speak German anywhere else. We talk to them. Maybe our German will get better that way. (Translation from Dari, GI 2, lines 370–373)

## 5.3. Getting access to institutions and resources

Many young people related that the mentors got them access to resources and institutions relevant to them, such as school, education or housing. Others reported that both the mentors and the organisation conducting the mentoring programme provided tangible help in situations of existential importance to them, i.e. including monetary support. Some young people, however, assumed that the resources, i.e. what the godparents provided or made available, would not extend beyond what they had previously accessed. This can be seen from the following reaction by one young person to another’s comment. When asked what he wanted his (ideal) godparent to be like, the first speaker replied that he did not want anything more than what he already got from his godparents. The second young person commented on that response:

Interviewee 1: I’m happy with that and I don’t want anyone else any more.

Interviewee 2: And they won’t give you any more than that, either (...). (Translation from Dari, GI 1, lines 1053–1054 and 1061–1062)

By making this comment, the second speaker was suggesting that the first – the one who did not want more – could himself be limiting his own expectations of what help he needed or could expect from his godparent. At the same time, there is something of a rebuke that the supposedly contented young person might in fact – now or in future – have further need for support than he imagines in his statement that he is happy: the second speaker’s point can be read as an ironic comment. Even if he wanted more from his godparent, he would not get it from her.

#### 5.4. Support for transitions in the life course

Several young people also saw the resources that the godparents represented or made available as relevant for coping with transitions to youth and young adulthood, especially with regard to education, training and employment, but also for transitions to housing, for example special accommodation in a larger camp for adult refugees. Nemir, for example, reported:

What also happens is they help us when I need something, if I register at a school or I need transfer to a camp, I want to learn at a daily school, they want to help us (...). (Translation from Arabic, GI 1, lines 272–277)

Another young person revealed that he had developed a mental outlook geared towards training thanks to contact with the godparents and their other connections. He was thus able to plan his next steps, and further steps building upon those.

#### 5.5. Emotional and psychosocial support

Many young people expressed the idea that they saw the godparents – being with them, or the connection to them – as emotional or psychosocial support. Some explicitly stated that they made them happy or were ‘good for’ them. They were encouraged and saw the mentors as asking about their opinions and goals in order to assist them. Asked how things have gone so far with the mentors, one young person answers, for example:

Mine is good, what can I say, it has done me good mentally and emotionally since I’ve been with them, it means a lot to me that they take time for me.

(Translation from Dari, GI 1, lines 310–313)

A statement by another young person also shows that he found his godparents’ attention fundamentally encouraging – as well-meaning behaviour and as helping him achieve his personal life goals:

What do they want? They want my best interests. They don’t want anything, I don’t think. They want me to be something, to be able to do something great. I say I want to work here as a car mechanic. They are helping me as best they can; they are helping me become that and they want to help me. (GI 1, lines 968–974).

Geedi reports on the extremely positive impact that this contact has, especially when he is not doing well, in two ways at once:

They help us and yes, even if I am sad or something, then I can go and tell them. And I’ve already said what support I need. It’s nice. (GI 2, lines 378–80)

(...) if I am not feeling too good, then I go to them, and then maybe I get an idea from them or something, and somehow, then I forget everything that’s happened and all that. (GI 2, lines 387–389)

### 6. Discussion of empirical findings

In sum, and drawing on other findings, it can be said that many interviewees described being with their mentors as a close social connection which they found ‘positive’ to ‘very positive’. This suggests that the interviewed mentees were connected – if no doubt to differing extents – by complex ties of reciprocity (Röttger-Rössler, 2016, p. 13), reciprocal structures and processes. Through this embeddedness in a social fabric, they attained togetherness and possibly affective belonging (see Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, pp. 13–14). The interviewees also expressed this using emotional descriptions.

As defined by Anthias (2006, p. 21), it can be seen here that belonging is, above all, relational, and closely linked to experience and social practices, such as meeting up, talking to one another and simply being together, etc. The young people’s statements can be understood as saying they experienced belonging in this way. That is crucial, especially for the issue of social inclusion. After all, it appears that a feeling of being safe and secure in a community or relationship was produced in the mentorships; a feeling of well-being, etc. extending beyond other fixed membership categorisations (such as ‘foreigner’), which might exist alongside one another but also, perhaps, beyond the

category of 'person in need of support'. Another contributing factor that can be reconstructed from the statements is that, through the mentors, they encountered new social situations in which they could try out roles and positions, sometimes playfully, e.g. during traditional Easter egg hunts.

### **6.1. Mentorship as a (partial) achievement of substantial social participation**

In summary, it can be said that, in various ways and to varying extents, the pilot project helped these young people find opportunities and ways of partially achieving substantial social participation at central institutions – clearly after just a few months of mentoring (see also Raithelhuber, Trott, & Piemontese, 2018). In this connection, the young people recognised and named the aspects they found important for social participation in Austria's nation-state society. They came into the pilot project and met 'their' mentors with clearly formulated personal ideas of the individual skills, status positions and steps required for such participation. They sometimes understood the model of 'godparenthood' that they were offered instrumentally as a way – even the only way – to foster certain central aspects which would help their life course progress positively and support them in their day-to-day efforts to survive and make a life for themselves.

This is underlined by the fact that in some cases the relationship with a mentor – e.g. understanding them, being close to them – was conceived as a sort of catalyst or critical point for gaining access to wider knowledge on society and social support, and to bridge or shortcut a perceived distance and divide. This resembles the findings of Sirriyeh (2013) on URMs' perceptions of foster parents as well as insights from Eriksson et al. (2018) on the role of 'Swedes' as representatives of the average majority population. However, it has to be highlighted, once again, that the situation of accommodation and social protection that 'our' interviewees experienced in the Austrian context, as well as their possibilities of forging contacts with locals, were much more precarious than in the two above-mentioned studies.

### **6.2. Mentorship as a possibility to achieve and manage social capital**

In the language of the concept of 'social capital' (Coleman, 1988), young people were thus given access to part of the social structure that they could use as a resource for their actions. Some deliberately sought access to it, which can be understood as them actively managing their social capital. That becomes especially clear in the 'negative examples', e.g. when young people wanted a 'new godparent', for instance, with 'more time', e.g. to learn with them. However, it can also be assumed that – with regard to certain resources which only became available to the young people during the godparenthood – social capital was also an unintended, indirect consequence of the interaction with their godparents (for the differences, see Torche & Valenzuela, 2011, pp. 183–185). This finding reflects similar insights from Sirriyeh's (2013) study on relationships with foster parents, mentioned above. There, the perceived and achieved status of a young person in care, reflected in their experiences of relationships, closely corresponded to young people's perception of social support and the availability of resources, including for key life course transitions.

### **6.3. Mentorship as social support**

The young people experienced mentoring as a form of support which was not only instrumental, but also informational and emotional (see Antonucci, Lansford, & Ajrouch, 2007 for an overview). They did, after all, receive advice and assistance in solving problems, while experiencing empathy and being liked and respected. In addition, some realised, through the developing relationship, that support would continue to be available in the future if any needs arose or materialised. For many, their social network expanded not just through their relationship with their godparents, but also through other resulting connections, enabling them to receive support, or support others, in the present and future. They experienced being invited into personal, intergenerational relationships

and, as a result, sometimes gaining access to a wider web of relationships. However, the interviewees did not only find the provision and receipt of this social support to be pleasant, good and positive; rather, they described it as demanding; something which required them to react and explain themselves. This finding resembles similar insights from the aforementioned Swedish study by Eriksson et al. (2018) on (former) URM's proximate social network members. According to the narrations reconstructed in in-depth interviews, the hard-to-attain, but highly rated contact with 'Swedes' required the prior decrypting of 'cultural' codes and adapting to new ways of behaving and communicating, including corporeality (Eriksson et al., 2018, p. 13).

#### **6.4. Understanding experiences in their institutional and political context**

The strong buffering and main effect of the mentoring relationship and the wide range of different supportive functions which can be reconstructed here for the mentees can only be explained – presumably – against the background of these young people's extreme exclusion and 'differential inclusion' (for the concept, see Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012) and the structural discrimination of migrants (see Bommes, 2011). The interviewees did not only experience this in their everyday encounters or in 'being a foreigner'. The central figures behind this were, or are, the welfare state institutions – such as the child and youth welfare services or schools – that organise and are responsible for this kind of differential inclusion (Raithelhuber, 2019a). The fact that young people who have lived for many months, or even years, in Austria as 'unaccompanied minor aliens' (the official term in Austria) described their mentors as caring, socially supportive and psychologically stabilising to such a great extent and in so many areas of their lives – as opening up opportunities for social participation – should not just be described and evaluated as a great achievement by the pilot project and the result of the commitment of its local adult volunteers. In fact, this effect, which can be discerned in the interviewees' lives on the level of meaning, also points to the widespread failure of existing state structures, especially in the areas of welfare and asylum/the courts, and to a lack of professionalism in dealing with these young people on various levels.

This reconstruction of the godparenthood from the young people's point of view as a social support structure and as social capital must, therefore, be examined in a more nuanced manner. After all, the young people themselves had different views of the programme's scope – the provisions falling under the godparenthood scheme – in terms of central aspects designed to gain and maintain young people's social participation in the medium and long term. Another crucial point must be not just how the young people saw their relative role in the 'godparenting' relationship but also how they understood their social position within the broader nation-state/social framework of the social services mentoring scheme. Some passages suggest that the participants did in fact make a direct link between this wider social positioning and their mentoring relationship. This aspect calls for future investigation.

### **7. Discussion of methods and methodology**

Reacting to the above-mentioned debates in the research on 'refugees', and particularly their experience, our approach has to be argued in a more comprehensive way. Further, this is also necessary in the light of criticism of the poor methodology of 'focus groups' (Bohnsack, 2004). In addition, the following explications justify the legitimacy and integrity of our condensed presentation of findings.

#### **7.1. Understanding the group interviews as a gateway towards a collective**

What characterised both multilingual situations of data collection is that, apart from certain, significant sequences, the speakers did *not* seem to respond to one another in a textbook-like manner. The main interviewer often asked participants to narrate. A critical look at how we handled the mentees' comments in the group interview could raise the impression that we just understood them as

unconnected utterances by individuals, rather than group interaction which is typical for group discussions. Were this the case, we could be accused of not having made full use of the potential offered by such a method of data collection, e.g. when group discussions are analysed using the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2010).

However, a closer look reveals that during the recording and the hours preceding it, a huge number of both corporeal and verbal interactions did in fact take place (see Section 5). Some young people spontaneously addressed our translators, correcting them to ensure that their voices were heard correctly. The boys, some of whom already knew one another, paid attention to what their peers were saying and did not merely speak to us or to the interpreters. They also directed their communication toward each other. Bearing this in mind, including the research situation we created together with the young people (see Section 3.3), and taking into account the 'tripled Otherness of URMs' (see above), our interview partners built a collective. They had common knowledge which allowed them to understand each other (including tacitly), as they shared relevant social, i.e. structurally analogous, experiences. This consideration allowed us to see them in a methodological sense as bearers of commonalities in terms of their fate, their history of socialisation, and the biographical experiences which connected them. Hence, they shared 'conjunctive spaces of experience' (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 105). Examples of this include their biographical experience of flight and independent cross-border movement, experiences of inequality produced through various, intersecting regimes of (im)mobility (see Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013), as well as their structurally analogous positioning as URMs in Austria. Considering all this, our material facilitated a thematic structuring and explication of the implicit or immanent meaning of what was said. A more encompassing, reflective interpretation as proposed in the documentary method was not achievable (see Bohnsack, 2010, pp. 105–110). It would have targeted the organisation of discourse around particular patterns of orientation. This is the main reason why I describe our talks as group *interviews* instead of discussions.

## **7.2. Steps towards creating a new, attractive territory for all of us in research**

If we agree for a moment that our somewhat 'wild' approach was not merely deficient, two aspects become apparent. Firstly, the study's intricacies are typical for research on the experience of people who are othered as URMs. As mentioned in the section on theory and methodology, any research on 'URMs' experience' has to reflect thoroughly what can and what cannot be experienced and told in situations of refugeeness, clientness and child(like)ness. This needs to be addressed in the methodological development of future studies in this field, including in social work, to be able to produce further knowledge on the fundamental questions described in the state of the art. Secondly, the study also provides some indications of how research can be developed a more progressive way. Following my conclusions for future research in this field (Raithelhuber, 2019b), I consider it essential, when researching into the experiences of 'URMs', to start out from a position that understands the political aspect of methodology.

In the presented study, one way to take this into account and follow up our investigation would have been to invite those we were able to identify as somehow 'open-minded' and reflective, or simply interested in future activities with us, to jointly explore fundamental questions (instead of just asking 'our' questions for data recording): How can we come together in a way that makes sense for all of us on the long run? How could we share experiences and develop activities in a way that does not merely reflect the differential, hierarchical positioning in which we are placed and represent common orientations (inside and outside of data collecting), but bears the potential to overcome related subjectivities and positions? In other words, and adapting Johansson's (2012, p. 112) reflections on the possibilities of doing research on childhood, how can we create a 'new attractive territory' that allows changes in various people's positionalities, in our (un)equal social relatednesses and senses of belonging?

## 8. Conclusion: future research perspectives

One avenue for future research would be to investigate the production of social support, social capital and inclusion at the intersection of young independent cross-border movers and programmes for ‘social integration’ or ‘intervention’ with a particular focus: How do the different actors produce (un)belonging differentially, which social practices are constitutive for it and how do different regimes of (im)mobility play into this? In this investigation, it would be appropriate to understand individuals’ movements as biographical and social navigation; as the young people’s attempts to move through various socio-temporally structured spaces in difficult, dynamic and confusing conditions. As the young people strive to gain agency, and indeed achieve it, they come up against social restrictions and categorial exclusions. However, they may in fact also become enmeshed in new social structures that transcend such limitations and help them gain a sense of community and belonging.

Developments in Austria at the time this article was written certainly speak in favour of practice and research paying closer attention to the political dimensions of mentoring for URM (and other socially problematised groups). In the summer of 2018, there were media reports of a public call for help from child and youth protection organisations which also launched various mentoring projects for URM. According to this public letter, based on reports received from civil society, including from voluntary mentors, ombudsman institutions were confronted with indications that young refugees were experiencing unconceivable suffering. The letter speaks of the catastrophic impact of tighter legislation and administrative practices, including in the context of deportations. These constraints meant that refugee agencies were no longer taking into account the young people’s individual ‘integration’ accomplishments, such as acquired social bonds, language skills or educational success. Likewise, the young people’s mental states (trauma, etc.) and the (horrific) situation of war in their countries of nationality did not ‘count’ any more. Quite the contrary, systematic exclusion, structural discrimination and intimidation through public institutions were at the top of the agenda.

With the aim of carrying out progressive research, and taking into account the future need to design social protection arrangements which extend beyond the limits of the welfarist, nationalist state, it is important to ensure that we follow a “practical utopia” research agenda’ (Raithelhuber, Sharma, & Schröer, 2018), especially with regard to young refugees. In many respects, after all, independent young cross-border movers can be excluded from social security structures linked to the nation state for some time, or even permanently – e.g. by institutional practices, legal categorisations, etc. This could indeed be exactly where the significance of mentoring projects lies: they may not simply drive or breed individual ‘social integration’ into the nation-state ‘host society’, in which case some would always be doomed to fail (see Anderson, 2013). Instead, such projects could turn into new spaces and arrangements of social protection which might even run counter to or reach out beyond the ‘security’ systems enshrined in the nation state and current social work logics of inclusion and exclusion (Raithelhuber, 2019a). Hence, such projects could relate differently to the precarious, highly mobile lives of people that nation states see not as their ‘citizens’, but as threats to ‘good society’ who have to be oppressed or deported.

Regarding the logics of social intervention which can be found in many similar projects for ‘URMs’, another aspect should be highlighted. The defining elements of a mentoring relationship, and how it might provide what forms of social support, cannot be understood, and can certainly not be researched into, following an input/output logic. Young people cannot be assumed to automatically have certain objective needs (to learn German, play football, learn cultural conventions) rooted beyond the institutional logic of this organised mentoring scheme and beyond their social positioning. Often, however, mentoring or other social assistance schemes seem to assume that an ‘objective’ need does exist: one that can be viewed as a ‘demand’ made of an institutional placement service which can be ‘matched’ through diagnosis or profiling. Our findings suggest that social support functions emerge dynamically in the very process of experiencing and negotiating the personal relationship between ‘young people’ and ‘adults’. What is meant here is a process where both sides (have to)

use their respective experiences – and possibly even the harm that has been done them – to create personal, and especially intergenerational, relationships. At the same time, it can be assumed that this political dimension which is inherent in the young people's social position as 'refugees' or 'foreigners' – and on top of that as 'unaccompanied minor refugees' – bleeds into these relationship structures and their dynamics (for a similar finding and critical position on youth 'mentoring for social inclusion', see Colley, 2003). Our findings suggest that, along with other elements, the social and political positions adopted by all the actors help define what it is that does, can and must become the subject of the support arrangement; of arrangements of social protection. Therefore, future research should look at mentoring programmes and similar practices as a particular form of institutionalised social problems work, but also as a possible site of 'rearranging differential inclusion through civic solidarity' (Raithelhuber, 2019a), whose organisation and social practices could yield vital knowledge on how to develop social protection beyond the iron cage of welfare as we know it.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Eberhard Raithelhuber** is a social scientist with a special emphasis on social work/social pedagogy and education. His current research projects are located at the intersection of child and youth services, migration and mobilities, and social policy and welfare. He has published on transitions in the life course, agency in social theory, social support and social intervention, youth and young adults, regional development and networks, social policy, citizenship and democracy, transnationalism and migration, and mobility.

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Raithelhuber is familiar with different qualitative methods and is experienced in dealing with issues such as data analysis and interpretation in multilingual and multicultural teams with different national backgrounds.

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