

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Turning into a “Godparent”: How adult volunteers negotiate their personal life to become a mentor for “Unaccompanied Refugee Minors”

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**Abstract:** This article looks into how volunteers deal with their biographies and social embeddedness to make sense of their engagement in mentoring before they are matched. It draws on a qualitative investigation on a community-based pilot youth mentoring program for “unaccompanied refugee minors” in Austria. This article reveals how already trained, local adults actively relate to “family,” “migration” and “previous activities” in their meaning-making. It shows how they negotiate their personal life and existing relationships in the process of turning into a future “godparent.” The discussion of findings against the state of the art leads the way to two heuristic claims: firstly, the study provides grounded arguments for an extension of the conventional mentoring concept on the side of the mentor. Secondly, for a more relational and processual approach towards the mentors’ side, both biographical and social network dimensions need to be integrated in methods and designs of youth mentoring research.

**Keywords:** youth mentoring programs, voluntary mentors, unaccompanied refugee minors, personal life, social networks, biography, mentoring as a concept

## 1 Introduction

Youth mentoring programs are one of the fastest-growing forms of social and educational intervention to deal with social problems in the broad field of child and youth services and social support. Related research is still considered to be at an early stage of development. Nonetheless, the body of scientific literature has grown enormously in recent years<sup>[1]</sup>. In the light of this situation, this article starts from a twofold observation and a subsequent irritation. Firstly, mentoring research, including that on youth mentoring programs, has increasingly reflected the claim that investigations on the overall phenomenon cannot be limited to the concept of a self-contained mentor-mentee dyad. Secondly, it is obvious that in recent years, research on the mentors’ side has increased<sup>[2,3]</sup>, including that using qualitative approaches<sup>[4-9]</sup>. Both developments together suggest that we should already have rich answers to two related questions: How do mentors’ biographies and current social embeddedness connect to the construction of mentor-

ing and possible achievements? How do (prospective) mentors deal both with making meaning of their (future) mentoring activity and shaping their relationships? The irritation is that youth mentoring research nevertheless has only scant responses to both questions.

To help fill this research gap on the mentors’ side in youth mentoring, this article looks into selected findings from a study on a pilot project, starting in the “long summer of migration” in Europe in 2015<sup>[10]</sup>. The project recruited, trained and, finally, matched voluntary, adult, local people from civil society to create what were in principle open-ended relationships with “unaccompanied refugee minors” (URMs for short) in an Austrian region<sup>[11,12]</sup>. This article leans on the analysis of 17 narrative interviews with volunteers after they accomplished their training. What is unique about the set is that at the time of data collection, these adults were about to get to know their prospective mentee and, hence, to become “godparents” (a term frequently used for youth mentors in German-speaking countries). After presenting the findings from this sub-study, in the discussion I will concentrate on how this leads the way to extending existing conceptualizations of “mentoring.” In the outlook, I will suggest directions for future research, including where to look and what to look at in “mentoring,” and how to gain deeper and richer knowledge on mentoring processes.

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## 2 State of the art

More than a decade ago, Keller argued that “mentoring resides within a mutually reinforcing (or inhibiting) network of other relationships”<sup>[13]</sup>. This, as the author continued, needs to be systematically considered within a “conceptual framework for the mechanisms of change involved in youth mentoring”<sup>[13]</sup>. Connected to the insight of “mentoring as a multiple relationship phenomenon”<sup>[14]</sup>, a growing body of studies on career and workplace mentoring have investigated so-called developmental networks since the Millennium. This literature takes stock of the fact that various people within a learning or working environment can be involved in the development of a mentee or protégé<sup>[15]</sup>. To be brief, such developments inside and outside of youth mentoring criticized the limited view on the mentoring dyad. To shed light on the research gap, in the following I compile an overview of how mentors’ connectedness prior to and during their mentoring activity has been taken into account in youth mentoring studies (and beyond) and how biographical and social aspects of their lives are reflected in the current state of the art.

### 2.1 Connections beyond the mentor-mentee dyad in youth mentoring studies

Partly as a reaction to the critique on the orthodox dyadic concept, a small number of mostly qualitative studies have looked into how youth mentors come upon, interact with or think about other people beyond the protégé, such as mentees’ peers<sup>[8]</sup>, parents, families and friends<sup>[7]</sup>. Other studies focused on how these “others” experience and perceive mentoring, *e.g.* by understanding how parents or caregivers view their children<sup>[16]</sup> or studying the view of program staff<sup>[17–19]</sup>. This development of considering mentoring relationships in a broader perspective has often been described as up to date.

However, we still have scant knowledge on the social and biographical side of the adults who are intended to work with socially problematized (youth) target groups in a mentoring scheme. For example, in their article on “family involvement,” Taylor and Porcellini<sup>[20]</sup> regarded only the families of young mentees, as a matter of course. This is also reflected in the heuristic “holistic” and “systematic model of mentoring” which Keller<sup>[13]</sup> presented more than a decade ago. It solely considered relations between the mentor, child, (his/her) parent(s) and the caseworker as part of the web constituting the mentoring system. The model did not incorporate aspects connected to a mentor’s biography or current social embeddedness.

Yet, this conceptualization of mentoring has slightly

changed. In a contribution on social networks from 2014, Keller and Blakeslee<sup>[21]</sup> mapped a hypothetical web of significant relations in youth mentoring. What is notable here is that it factors in the mentor’s personal connections, *e.g.* relations to his or her partner, friends, relatives and community. Hence, these ties are portrayed as existing *prior* to a new relationship with a mentee. Over and above this, the authors suspect that mentoring expands the mentor’s networks over time. In addition, Keller and Blakeslee connected the social network perspective to social capital, thus emphasizing the possible bridging and bonding functions of social ties. However, as Keller and Blakeslee conclude, “youth mentoring research rarely refers to the social network characteristic of mentors and mentees”<sup>[21]</sup>.

With a few exceptions<sup>[4,19]</sup>, studies using qualitative methods have adopted a very narrow research perspective on the mentors’ side<sup>[5,6]</sup>. I venture to say that many do not reflect the spirit of in-depth qualitative inquiry. This, however, is necessary, as the two still unanswered questions presented at the outset are anchored in a social constructionist, interpretative approach towards the social. This, in turn, requires a thorough engagement with qualitative inquiry for the production of meaningful knowledge. In contrast to this premise, almost all existing studies filtered out and sorted contrived data into different categories of mentors’ “motives,” “motivations”<sup>[22]</sup> “needs”<sup>[6]</sup> or “role conceptions”<sup>[5]</sup>.

On this point, therefore, the conclusion has to be that youth mentoring network connections on the side of the mentor that exist *prior* to his or her engagement and those that he or she gains through mentoring (*e.g.* to other mentors) have not been researched to any substantial extent in youth mentoring. There is barely any scientific knowledge on the social connectedness and “personal life”<sup>[23]</sup> of mentors within a qualitative research perspective. According to Smart’s definition of a sociological, relational “personal life” approach<sup>[23,24]</sup> “the personal” and personhood have to be understood as something thoroughly constituted as and by relationships; as something mobile and in movement (as against the idea of the individual having a relatively fixed state or status)<sup>[25]</sup>. Following up on this, we know little about what mentors bring to youth mentoring, *e.g.* based on their personalities or subjectivities, their biography, prior experiences and social embeddedness, including their social and emotional (inter)relationships.

### 2.2 Antecedents of mentoring in quantitative studies

As a consequence of this intermediate finding, the view needs to be widened. Within an operational and

functional(ist) perspective of mentoring, recruiting the “right mentor,” training, matching and supporting him or her with further activities is widely considered to be the very basis for the establishment and subsequent success and desired outcome of any mentoring relationship. Hence, within quantitative mainstream mentoring research, different individual aspects of mentors have been investigated extensively. Examples for this are mentor attributes, dispositions, personality characteristics, values, previous experience (as a mentor or mentee), “cost-benefit” calculations and so on. In her quantitative meta-analysis of various factors influencing mentoring support, Ghosh<sup>[26]</sup> united these various aspects under the term “antecedents” to predict mentoring outcomes. Researchers frequently consider such antecedents as factors to be itemized, for example, in studies designed to determine the individuals’ willingness to serve as a mentor or to continue their service<sup>[27]</sup>.

Seen through the lens of the sociology of (scientific) knowledge one could say that these means of conducting research put mentoring scholars into the position of testing the significance of selected aspects which, according to the scientists’ own assessment, offer a valuable perspective to produce findings on “mentors.” Thus, researchers compile knowledge on what underlies and shapes mentoring by looking at how particular variables correlate, in the best case measuring them in before-after designs, rather than reconstructing the actors’ own knowledge production in meaning-making and social interactions. It is telling that (prospective) mentors’ own situatedness and social relatedness, including their (present) experiences and (past) memories, have played a considerable small role in current, mostly quantitative research on mentors. This, for example, is visible in Allen’s often cited, encompassing review of (quantitative) research on “mentoring relationships from the perspective of the mentor,” published in 2007<sup>[2]</sup>. Here, Allen groups what is actually going on in a mentor’s life and possibly impacts substantially on mentoring under the heading “situational variables.” Mentors’ prospects on a mentoring activity are grouped under the headline “expected costs and benefits”<sup>[2]</sup>. The wording testifies to the strong embeddedness of this view in social exchange theory and rational choice theory. However, this perspective is hard to connect to current understandings of how the social can be researched within qualitative inquiry<sup>[28]</sup>. As I posit, a methodological and epistemological reflection on what is brought about by these ways of looking on the mentors’ side is largely lacking in research, including in youth mentoring studies.

### 2.3 Research gaps on mentors in youth mentoring studies

To put it in positive terms, at least it can be registered that both quantitative and qualitative studies on mentors acknowledge that they *do* have prior experience, achieved capacities and ongoing social relations, which they might bring to (youth) mentoring. Further, it is often mentioned that mentors *do* have particular ideas about their (future) protégé, about themselves and future activities. This can also be seen in research on youth mentoring<sup>[29]</sup>. Some, if not many studies consider these aspects significant for the ways individuals become a mentor, join a particular mentee, develop as a person and impact on others, and how they bring about a relationship with a certain quality<sup>[13]</sup>. For example, some longitudinal quantitative studies (though not on youth mentoring) aim to show the causal connection between pre-mentoring and mentoring outcomes. Logically, they do so by measuring the level of particular outcomes before and after a person enters into a mentor role, as investigations on “transformational leadership behavior” show, for instance<sup>[30]</sup>.

To sum up, studies on mentors have generally left out core aspects of the social construction of “mentoring” and related social and organizational practices, as well as more complex, relational and biographical perspectives on this<sup>[11]</sup>. So far, established methods in qualitative or quantitative social network analysis have not been deployed in research on youth mentoring<sup>[21]</sup>. Most studies on the side of the mentors have followed a quantitative, factorial logic<sup>[2]</sup>. I posit that with their focus on itemizing and testing attributes, dispositions or self-perceptions they were unable to understand biographical and social aspects within the larger picture of (future) mentors’ meaning-making, social interactions and social embedding. This is also true for some studies on youth mentoring which reported that they employed qualitative methods, but did so with a largely quantitative mindset<sup>[5,6]</sup>.

What is notable here is that none of the above-mentioned qualitative studies on mentors in youth mentoring programs collected data on *prospective* mentors. If they looked at people’s life prior to becoming a mentor, they used *retrospective* data. However, they did so mostly without taking the narrative quality of mentors’ utterances into account in their analysis. To my knowledge, since the Millennium only two qualitative studies, both focusing on community-based youth mentoring, have used a qualitative longitudinal design with initial and follow-up interviews with mentors<sup>[4,18]</sup> and thus been able to pick up on mentors’ (early) aspirations or expectations. However, only Colley applied an in-depth

processual analysis to her ethnographic narrative data<sup>[4]</sup>.

## 2.4 Derivatives for the design of the present study

Hence, there is still much to explore. One reason is that if one collects narrative data *before* mentors are matched with their young counterpart, it is most likely of a different kind. In other words, such data offers a different access to social realities in mentoring. In addition, it is most likely that qualitative research on mentors' meaning-making *prior* to mentoring reflects various aspects of the overall historical, organizational and political problem setting implied in a youth mentoring program and related proceedings (e.g. selection interviews with staff, training etc.). This is because the social realities constructed in mentoring, understood here as an extended, dynamic phenomenon, are most likely to differ to a substantial degree across studies which take place in varied environments and settings.

Taking all of this into account, this article looks into findings from a qualitative sub-study on mentors within a pilot project for so-called "unaccompanied refugee minors" at peak times of refugee cross-border mobility towards and through Europe in 2015. The pilot project can be seen as a subsequent effort to react to young independent movers' differential inclusion<sup>[31]</sup> by a nation state's welfare system<sup>[12]</sup>. As far as I know, up to now and world-wide, no other qualitative investigation has looked into how voluntary local "adults" perceive or experience their future, present or past activities and relationships as *prospective* mentors for so called "unaccompanied refugee minors".

## 3 Research setting, assumptions and design

This sub-study was part of a more complex explorative study. It used a range of qualitative methods to look at how a pilot mentoring project for URM's evolved and took shape. A local semi-independent ombuds agency for the defense and promotion of children's rights in an Austrian region initiated the program in 2015.

### 3.1 Rationale and research design

Within our overall study, we have interviewed the same mentors (termed "godparents" in the pilot project) repeatedly. The investigation was led by the author. Four young female voluntary researchers conducted most of the interviews. At the time of the first data collection, the local voluntary adults had finished their training provided by the organization running the pilot program, but still had not met "their" future mentee face to face.

One of the reasons for this design was that we wanted

to focus to an extended degree on the role which biographical and social aspects related to the mentors (e.g. their current social environment) played in their self-perception and self-construction, looking at them as individuals who were possibly working on (future) mentorship and, with their biography and social networks, working through and for it. The main reason for collecting data *before* the "matching date" was that we wanted to be able to produce data on how mentors *generally* conceptualized their match, including the images they had of the "type" or "group" of young people they were volunteering for. Hence, based on social-constructionist research on social services and social work, we understood the interviews with future mentors as active sense-making by future mentors in the light of dominant discourses on URM's and of related social problematizations which mentors were made familiar with through the preparatory, compulsory training.

### 3.2 Research setting, sample and data processing

The prospective "godparents" were contacted by e-mail and informed about the purpose of the survey. During their compulsory mentor training, they had already been told that the survey was part of a scientific study used by the ombuds organization to gain insights into its pilot project. In the interview, they were again reminded that participation was voluntary. Interviewees were also promised that their data would be protected and to a large extent anonymized. The interviewees chose when and where the interviews took place. All the interviews, which took between 15 and 50 minutes, were recorded. The standard method used was to take notes recording the detailed circumstances of the interviews. The data was transcribed verbatim with an intermediate level of precision. Guidelines were available, mainly offering guidance to interviewers (the guidelines can be made available on request in German). As is normally the case in relatively open, narrative interviews, these were used as required.

### 3.3 Operationalizing the research interest statement

For the start of the conversation, which is the main subject of this article, the theme was first to be addressed of how interviewees came to be "godparents" in the course of their life history. A second block of the guidelines was designed to investigate how the mentors saw the young people, how they imagined their relationship with "their" (future) young person and how they understood their role as a "godparent." A third section dealt



with the training period and how they saw the organization carrying out the program and training. These findings from block two and three are not set out here for reasons of brevity.

The introductory question of the first block was “How did it come to be that you are here?” Among other things, this question implied that interviewees should connect their own participation in the project with past events and with their social dimensions (such as with past volunteering in youth work). It was also intended to encourage mentors to relate their participation in the project to social positionings (such as parents facing an “empty nest”). Finally, it was also supposed to make the “voluntary local adults”, connect their notions of life (*e.g.* their own, future life) with the here and now of developing a mentorship.

All in all, the introductory question was intended to situate the narratives temporally, which always also has spatial and social dimensions, longitudinally, across the “length of the biography,” as it were. A second question in this block was designed to link in with this. The focus here was on how they currently related to “soon being a godparent.” From that basis, they were then asked about their social environment; entering, so to speak, transversely into the (social) “breadth of the biography” and, in doing so, examining the position occupied by the prospective godparenthood in significant everyday social relationships (with their family, workmates etc.). Thus, the question “What do those around you think about you becoming (being) a godparent?” asked for reactions they had noticed in their social environment; about third-party opinions and statements made relevant in mentors’ narratives.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The first step taken after the data was collected was to analyze three interviews line by line using a hermeneutic interpretation procedure tending towards sequential analysis. This enabled topics and aspects to be picked out which would help organize the analysis of the remaining material. One aim was to reconstruct implicit meanings. The interviews were analyzed almost entirely in the context of an interpretation group (a minimum of four eyes). For practical and financial reasons, but above all due to the explorative nature of the research, the decision was made to carry out the analysis as a cross-section of the individual cases, following the method of content analysis. The intensive occupation with the three interviews, which were initially processed on a case-by-case basis, showed that this approach was a good means of setting out the information and making the expected findings. It was thus possible to identify thematic clusters indicating

how, for instance, the mentors link their experiences to their biography. As is usual in qualitative social research, the process of analyzing, interpreting and theorizing data was circular.

### 3.5 Methodology

It needs to be emphasized we started from the assumption that the storying of experience is highly connected to us as investigators and shaped by both closer and more distant environments of data collection. We did not think that we simply “activate” narrations of (past) events on the side of the interviewee through “techniques”. On the contrary, and following Gubrium and Hollstein’s ideas on “analyzing narrative reality”<sup>[32]</sup>, we were aware of the fact that the accomplishment of situational narrative work depends on many aspects. Organizational environments, interactive settings and institutionalized “cultures” of youth mentoring and social support for URMs, as well as of scientific data collection, all influence the staging of narrative events and enable mentors to talk about themselves, mentoring and the other(ed) in a particular manner.

As a result, though our questions were open-ended, even the location of the pilot project already created certain frameworks. Certain social positionings and images of being a mentor were specified by the pilot program and, therein, the compulsory mentor training, such as the figures of the “family-like godparent,” the “professional godparent” and the “committed-contractual godparent”<sup>[11]</sup>. We expected the “godparents” to adopt a position towards these figures, including the moral obligations connected to different membership categorizations. The pilot program thus undoubtedly proposed normative and moral interpretations of “godparenthood.” It was therefore to be assumed that young people’s categorization and problematization as URMs was an important background, in the light of which all other social processes and images of the self and others were constructed.

As the ombuds agency carrying out the program sees itself as concerned with the universal rights of the child, this problematization was based on the following central aspects: Firstly, URMs were publicly shown to be a particularly vulnerable social group, but above all a group of young people in public care who were discriminated against by (welfare) state institutions and protection systems. Secondly, the overall pilot program was promoted as one (if not the only) practical means of developing concrete forms of social support for these young people who are separated from their families, with the help of volunteers from civil society.

## 4 Presentation of findings

The following paragraphs will highlight a number of descriptive clusters which we were able to build. Quotes, originally most of them in a Bavarian or Austrian German dialect, will show how the mentors developed their ideas on mentoring and connected them to various elements from their biography and personal life. In addition, I will exemplify how we interpreted some parts of mentors' stories.

### 4.1 Biographical connection: "family", "migration" and "previous occupation"

All the interviewees linked their participation as "godparents" to central aspects of their own life story, with the connections made in the narratives proving to be varied and multi-dimensional. Many participants made a connection to their own family. These connections were constructed in widely varying ways, partly depending on the possibilities and limitations of their own biographical context:

*"... how our children would feel if they had to go somewhere on their own." (Jovanovic, 58)*

*"Goodness, that would be nice; we have [several] children ourselves, if another child, uh, was simply with us." (Neubauer, 9-10)*

*"I come from a big family (...) I've, um, got godchildren." (Novak, 51-56)*

These statements also make it clear how, as they logically and emotionally process the prospective relationship with the as yet unknown (always male) young person, prospective mentors used analogies to create biographical links to existing relationships. These quotes refer to pre-existing parental and familial care relationships. The future relationship is thus located in the space of the family and presented as a care relationship that is in some way "normal." In some cases, connections were made with care relationships which have already come to an end, as can be seen from this statement:

*"Well the two of us are doing well. The children have grown up. (...) and I think you can definitely do something constructive." (Eiser, 55)*

This quote shows that the resources and capacities previously used by their own children now seem to be free. In other words, their capacity for a familial care relationship with a young refugee is, on one hand, only actively produced through an analogy with their own family or parenting. On the other hand, this enables them to imagine resources being used for this new, developing relationship placed in the context of childhood and family, as there is now enough "space" in the family. The significance of placing it in a family context can also be seen

in the following statement:

*"It was the whole family, (...) we wouldn't have done it if the whole family wasn't behind it and asking actually and when, huh, when are we getting the refugee." (Neubauer, 43-45)*

In this quote, the prospective young "refugee" is indeed placed inside the structure of this multi-member family; "integrated" into it, as it were. The interviewee's own family thus provides context and limits. Studying the future godparents' meaning-making, this act of situating the URM in the space of the family can be reconstructed as a pattern of creating biographical ties. It is strongly reminiscent of the figure of the "family-like godparent" from the triangle of godparenthood which we derived from participant observation of the information events and the training modules (above)<sup>[11]</sup>. In this triangle, the three figures of godparenthood reflect ideal-type images presented to future mentors of what it means to be a "godparent." Thus, these figures are a core structure underlying the overall pilot project. Hence, the figure of the "family-like godparent" entails an idea of a hierarchical, generational relatedness to others. Inherently, it is based on the notion of a semi-natural, almost pedagogical relationship, from which a sort of responsibility of care and for the enculturation of the younger generation is deduced. Obviously, the biographical meaning-making of the trained mentors in the interviews "fits" this picture.

In summary, from the perspective of social problematization and processing social problems, it can be said with regard to the family aspect that when an analogy is drawn to a godparent's own children and care relationships in a familial context, the young person, the URM, is "normalized" to a certain extent. This normalization emerges from what is actually a perceived difference: the relationship is not, after all, a "natural" one that has developed in this family space. To be processed as such, it first needs to be *defined* as such. From the family perspective, the young people are imagined as being in a relationship that is unequal both generationally and pedagogically (parent/child and adult/child). What this also means, however, is that issues of childraising and authority principally come to the fore with regard to the shape the future relationship will take.

Another biographical link was the godparents' experience of migration. That included their own experience of migration, or that of someone close to them. Associations which appeared disparate in fact proved to share common elements. On one hand, migration was linked to cultural and geographical distance; for example, parallels were drawn between the young people's experience of migration and that of the interviewee's spouse. In an-

other case, the interviewee used their own family’s origins story to situate their becoming a godparent:

*“The main reason for this godparenthood is, I think is because of my wife, because she herself, uh, has a background of migration [einen Migrationshintergrund] (...) And she herself also more or less had something like a godparent.” (Koller, 10-11)*

The German term “Migrationshintergrund” used here represents a highly politicized concept which is used in everyday life and the media in the context in which the data was gathered. In everyday life, the media and the scientific discourse, this term is associated with foreign cultures, difficulties achieving societal agency or insurmountable differences based on a notion of people’s origins related to their geographical extraction<sup>[33]</sup>. On one hand, use of this term refers to the interviewee’s own experience of migration-related difference; on the other hand, the characterization is also attached to the young people, as they also have “this Migrationshintergrund.” In this particular case, the perceived difference is viewed as something which can be “worked on” and tackled with positive results by means of a mentorship:

*“... and I myself had the impression that it helped her a great deal (...) uh, when it came to integration, when it came to schooling, it really, yes, was certainly extremely helpful.” (Koller, 14-17)*

Another story links migration to the context of a collective historical experience connected with the interviewee’s own biography:

*“Sure, the thing about unaccompanied refugee minors is definitely an issue I know and I come from a town where we, I grew up with it, that is, we had a reception center (...) or like a like a center that’s::: always been a trad... like even wh, when Germany was still divided, then all the, all the people from the Eastern bloc already came to us via Hungary and so that was, migration was already an issue for us.” (Novak, p. 3, 46-52)*

Here, a link is being made to migration as a basic, historical social element, with a clear analogy being drawn to the young people as URMs. The interviewee is interpreting the current social phenomenon by placing it in a historical context. At the same time, it can be relativized and normalized as something that is actually “nothing new:” something that was already around and taking place a long time ago. The speaker is also suggesting that there is some valuable experience in her own positioning, as it is something she “grew up with.” Nonetheless, the phenomenon is associated with unknown, unclear and possibly negative connotations, as can be seen from the description of the places as “a reception center (...) or like a like a center” and the people there as “all the, all the people from the Eastern bloc.”

All in all, the following main trends can be seen in the connections interviewees make with their own experiences of migration. The prospective mentors see “migration” as linked to foreignness, difficulty and confusion. These tendentially problematic associations are portrayed as something which can very much be worked on by a mentorship. From their own point of view, these mentors see migration and the difficulties associated with it not as a new set of problems, but as one which has always been around.

Another link the interviewees find with their own biography is the connection they see with a past activity. Here, too, the spectrum is broad. One connection, for example, might be past involvement with similar groups:

*“In the past I once worked in youth welfare // mhm // and there I also worked on a project with [social aid organization for children].” (Seidl, 9-10)*

*“I um uh (.) was also already socially active at home.” (Novak, p. 3, 12)*

The last quote shows that this kind of “past activity” can also be related to the idea of (their own) social or civic engagement: the speakers are positioning themselves in the idea of public, social affairs. “Socially active” and “youth welfare” refer to a public sphere; to a civil society structure designed to deal with perceived social problems. It is no great leap to imagine that in this case, taking part in the mentoring program is not motivated only by the interviewee’s notion about the target group (the young people or URMs) or by the perceived opportunity to take up a previous activity again. Rather, it also seems significant that this can be placed in a public, socially active context. Perhaps this is partly due to the public positioning of the ombuds organization which developed and implemented the scheme.

In addition to this, taking up a past activity again is connected to other aspects. Some future mentors obviously imagine being a godparent as creating a time and place in which they can experience and actively bring about personal change. Godparents locate their “taking part” in their own biography, describing the time as having *now* come or been chosen for them to make space for change in their current situation in life. This becomes clear from the following statements, among other things:

*“I want to cut back a bit, cut back my working hours.” (Steiner, 14)*

*“My wife and I are doing it as a bit of a joint venture so to speak.” (Jovanovic, 21)*

In summary, this means prospective mentors in our study make sense of their being part of the mentoring program *here* as godparents with relation to their own biography. This depends on their personal ideas, experiences, associations and wishes. Even when they describe

relevant prior experience from their occupation, their future relationship with this young person, and their being a mentor, are placed in a private, personal and/or public, social context. They thus do not frequently place it in a professional context, even though that would certainly also have come into question, as many of the mentors have related professional qualifications or have worked in social fields. The prospective godparenthood can also be reconstructed as a possibility to make personal life changes. This can come in many shapes, from attempts to create a work-life balance to a project involving their family and partner. This description and theorization of the statements shows that future godparents try to connect the prospective mentorship to their own biography, drawing on relevant and important motifs and aspects from their life history. The main patterns revealed by the analysis are links to experiences of migration, family relationships and previous work. Here, "migration" is presented in a problematic context emphasizing expected culturally specific differences which are hard to overcome, but also considered something that can be dealt with to some extent through godparenthoods.

## 4.2 Connections to the social environment and embeddedness

Our study was also interested in how the prospective mentors situate themselves in their social presence. Reactions from their environment, opinions and comments they hear all indicate the position assigned to this new development, being a godparent, in our respondents' current social situation. Here, too, there is a very wide range. Basically, the interviewees reported what was certainly positive feedback on their upcoming mentorship from their social environment:

*"They actually all think it's pretty good (...) and promised to help us." (Eiser, 125)*

*"Well my sister for example she says yes brilliant or at work they do say: yes great, I like it." (Aigner, p. 4, 56)*

Often, people near to them are interested in their becoming a mentor. This often goes as far, for example, as such people evidently also wanting to train to be a godparent, or considering it something they should aim for:

*"And my neighbor knows; at first she was thinking about doing it too, but she is just changing jobs at the moment." (Aigner, p. 4, 34)*

The perceived support from their working environment, especially, is seen as positive:

*"And I was only able to do it [the training] because everyone said, 'Great idea, we'll put everything off so you can do that in the morning' //mhm// and things like that gave me positive encouragement and sometimes even amazed me." (Seidl, 57)*

All these perceived reactions, support from their family, support from their working environment and people from their social environment potentially emulating them, evidently enable the prospective godparents to paint the future relationship in an appreciative light. Moreover, from their own descriptions the future mentors were also very much able to position themselves as "knowledgeable" vis-à-vis their environment. The following shows how mentors describe the reaction of people in their everyday social environment (fellow workers, neighbors, family):

*"Well there's, there are also lots of questions, lots of people interested in exactly how it works and what happens and what you can expect and so on." (Jovanovic, 27)*

Through the training, especially, a prospective mentor thus seems to gain a kind of "expert status." This is in the context of refugee migration being a very current, politicized social topic in Europe which was, at the time (from the second half of 2015) being discussed at length by the public at large and the media. In many places, e.g. at railroad stations and border crossings, the population as a whole was made aware of refugee migration on a daily basis.

Although reactions from their environment were perceived as positive throughout, at second glance some godparents' statements show signs of a kind of sensitive restraint. A societal, political and social aspect of the subject of refugees was brought up:

*"OK, so I'd say it was naturally positive, so to speak, as I choose who I talk to about it." (Steiner, 63)*

*"Very (2) mixed. Well, mixed might not be, we haven't, for a start we haven't told everyone, with good reason, because we simply both know that there are some people around us who really wouldn't know what to think of the subject. To put it diplomatically." (Koller, 26)*

The prospective mentors evidently chose very carefully who they told about their becoming a "godparent". This can be interpreted as meaning that they saw their decision to become a mentor for an URM as requiring them to take up an imagined position vis-à-vis their environment. They also seemed to experience their social environment *demanding* that they take up an active position of this kind. Some seemed to be afraid, or were even sure that people around them would express negative opinions about it.

It must be emphasized that these reflections and experiences all took place *before* a real mentoring relationship even came about. Put even more simply, it can thus be said that for the respondents, wanting to become a godparent to an URM also meant having to adopt a societal, social and political position. On one hand, this position



was constructed in light of or through reflecting on their own experiences (longitudinally, over the "length of the biography"). On the other hand, though, the prospective mentors also thought this position had to be sensitively brought up with regard to their social environment, and supported and possibly legitimized towards that social environment (transversely, across the "breadth of their life").

At the same time, it appears that this new position was thus also co-constructed by their social environment. This shared construction appears especially clear when two dimensions are examined. On one hand, their becoming a "godparent" was negotiated within their social environment, turning their social environment into an observer, evaluator and commentator. On the other hand, their deliberate selection of who to tell about their mentorship shows that they had reflective knowledge about their environment occupying these positions. In describing the perceived reactions of their social environment, the future godparents were also describing the potential conflict and problems that being a godparent could involve:

*"Uh, pffffh, well our oldest daughter talks about it a lot on school, that there is something like that, and lots of parents have talked to me about it, like, 'wow, you're really prepared to do that?!!' (2) Someone from such a different culture, with such traumatic experiences uh, then you have to deal with something like that uh right up close." (Neubauer, 27)*

*"Yes, a friend a very dear friend who really worries, well doesn't worry about me but he treats me with great, great care he was mh::: 'look after yourself and don't overdo things.'" (Novak, 22-23)*

Their social environment saw the future godparents at least to some extent as "risk-takers." What is interesting about this is that in an intergenerational relationship, between adults and young people as, for example, with youth mentoring, the younger side is normally ascribed a vulnerable position. In a relationship between an adult and a child, the child or young person is normally considered to have less agency due to their development. In everyday discourse and in the pedagogical literature, it is often assumed that "children" or "young people" are more subject to the negative consequences of the parents' "adult" actions than the reverse. In the case of the prospective mentorship, however, the opposite was true in the narratives from our sample of reactions from their social environment. There, the "adult" side was seen as the one which could be "vulnerable" and was thus told to "take care." Here, too, it is possible to reconstruct the process by which their social environment asks the potentially critical question of whether this relationship is

"right" or should be entered into at all. The other side, the young person, tends to be construed as the partner in the relationship that is "non-adequate:"

*"Well, no idea what it's like, or what it'll be like if we go to a village of 2,000 people where my parents live and all of a sudden two dark-skinned young men are there, there'll certainly be someone who says 'who on earth are they' or 'what are you two doing here' (draws breath)." (Seidl, 79-82)*

*"Well, I think that probably something will only come when (...) when it really comes down to it and when I just like, say hey, we're coming over today and yeah, we're bringing Kamal." (Aigner, p. 5, 10)*

Here it can be seen that the prospective mentors' ideas of how their social environment might possibly react are more or less at odds with basic normative convictions about a "modern," open, democratic society. After all, a liberal understanding of society sees free choice in people's personal (and economic) relationships as a basic element of individuality. Nonetheless, the reactions and judgements that the godparents imagine could come from their social environment reflect an idea that this kind of relationship with "that kind" of young people is not "proper" or "seemly", and could cause social sanctions.

Further uncertainty about the social impact of the new godparent relationship can be seen from the fact that the prospective mentors were not (always) sure how far, how long or to what extent their social environment would be willing to support the mentorship:

*"And my parents they live in [place] so quite some distance from here, they responded with 'yes OK.' They didn't make any comment, either positive or negative. It was, 'sure, go ahead and do that then.'" (Steiner, 70)*

In conclusion, the men and women we interviewed had already spent a long time before they entered into a relationship with the young people negotiating their new position as a "godparent" with themselves and with and within their existing social contacts. They can almost be said, at least for the time being, to have negotiated this new development and the change in their social network *pre-emptively*, taking in and processing the reactions and opinions coming from their environment. In some cases, this enabled new, additional networks to be created, or existing ones to change in terms of their quality and function, as they "unexpectedly" proved to be a source of social support. Some workmates, family members and neighbors evidently seemed to be entering into the new relationship as well. Sometimes, however, certain elements of their social networks and personal relationships were excluded from the future mentorship. They "deliberately" chose not to talk about the subject with everyone

in their social environment.

As researchers, we took this to mean that the social field in which the prospective mentors were active, and which they were processing through reflection, was very likely be part of the relationship that was about to develop. This would ultimately be the source of the specific, nuanced possibilities and restrictions affecting the young people's "integration" and "support." Conversely, this might also affect the godparents' social environment: after all, both the adult(s) and the young person become facilitators in their respective social networks. They become negotiators and brokers; hubs (potentially) both enabling and hindering the spread of knowledge, relationships, connections and discussion. However the future mentorship relationship was specifically linked to the social environment in each case, one aspect which can be reconstructed is that the godparents did not only imagine the extent of the relationship and its possible effects within a "mentor/mentee" dyad. Rather, they saw their social environment as part of the relationship and, at the same time, saw themselves as being challenged by their social environment to adopt a position with regard to their "new" relationship.

## 5 Methodological reflection and critique

It would have been an option to analyze each and every one of the transcribed interviews with a "deeper" approach, *e.g.* narrative-sequential analysis, and to move forward "case by case" throughout the whole sample. This could have led to a reconstruction of different ways in which prospective "godparents" made sense of and oriented towards their aspired future of developing a relationship and engaging with an "URM." One reason why we did not do so was pragmatic. Though the public and media awareness of the "refugee issue" was quite high at the time of data collection, we were not able to organize third-party funding for the project in the Austrian context within the short period between the relatively unexpected start of the pilot program and the indicated time for data collection and subsequent processing. The main reason, however, was that we intended from the very beginning to generate and analyze qualitative processual data on how local volunteers develop their experiences over time. Thus, we wanted to collect data within a longitudinal qualitative study. In that respect, we have realized three interview waves up to now. The narrative analysis of this data, which will follow the design of case-by-case narrative analysis, is still ongoing.

## 6 Discussion

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss how youth mentoring programs can make use of these insights on an operational, practical level, *e.g.* for the supervision or training of mentors. In a research-oriented perspective striving for the production of fundamental scientific knowledge, the particular findings we have achieved up to now could be pushed forward in multiple directions. They connect to a variety of fields of study, *e.g.* on volunteering and civic action, on the social transformation of welfare systems and forms of social support, or even on the public and private forms of dealing with "refugee migration." Here, I will keep to the questions I announced at the outset, asking what the study adds to fill the indicated research gap.

### 6.1 Core findings

One of the core findings of this study is that these already trained, local voluntary future adult mentors within our overall one-case study negotiated their prospective mentoring role and related capacities with their social environment or milieu much before they were "matched" into a mentoring relationship. I thus see this as one important indication that mentoring relationships are not constructed entirely "out of thin air," but begin well in advance, in people's imagination and the rewriting of their own biography. At the same time, the mentors' social environment can range from social support to a critical stance questioning their relationship with the young person and ascribing them the characteristics of personal risk-taking and placing themselves at risk by being godparents. In addition, mentors oriented towards their future, but still unknown young counterpart using various elements from their own biography. A third finding strongly connected to these two aspects is that "our" mentors used and developed their engagement in mentoring as a way to shape their own life or at least to attempt to achieve this.

### 6.2 Connection to other, closely connected studies

As I have explained, the focus, setting and environment of our study is unique. However, as the state of the art showed, there are a few qualitative studies close to our research interest, design and approach. Without a doubt, Basualdo-Delmonico and Spencer<sup>[18]</sup> showed how ("fresh" and "trained") mentors try to rationalize their role and possible happenings, including social encounters with members of the mentees' social network. They also convincingly demonstrated how vaguely the interviewed mentors formulated this kind of perspective,

including an anticipation of possible ways they could react to it, at the beginning of a mentoring relationship. However, we were able to provide empirically grounded knowledge on how *future* “godparents for unaccompanied refugee minors” negotiated their development with their social environment and rationalized it against the background of their own biography and life history, including how they fit into historical and contemporary social and political contexts.

Colley<sup>[4]</sup> reveals a lot about the biographical and social embeddedness of mentors’ sense-making in her noteworthy study on “mentoring for social inclusion”, already published in 2003. She used data from multiple sources (*e.g.* interviews with mentors and mentees, talks with staff, ethnographic notes) to elaborate thick narratives on a number of matches. Amongst other things, this approach showed how mentors “stilled” or fed their own desires through mentoring and how mentoring was enmeshed in their biographies. In addition, Colley was able to connect the storied happenings to the mentoring relationship and to the social networks of both the mentors and mentees. However, without diminishing her achievements, I want to emphasize that Colley first interviewed mentors shortly *after* they took up their relationship, whereas we did so *beforehand*. Whereas Colley<sup>[4]</sup> was more interested in revealing the uniqueness of every single mentor-mentee case, our analysis yields topological findings based on empirically saturated clusters. Hence, rather than providing a “deep” understanding of each individual mentoring case and of the complexity and ambivalences of “mentoring for social inclusion”<sup>[4]</sup> for so-called “disaffected youth” within a particular, employability-oriented youth mentoring program (something which Colley mastered without a doubt), our selected findings are more suitable for a conceptual and methodological discussion. Nonetheless, I am convinced that Colley’s sensitivity towards issues of power, her attentiveness to the socio-economic position and habitus of mentors and, connected to her Bourdieusian perspective, her mindfulness of various forms of capital can feed into the development of a theoretically saturated, empirically based, extended concept of mentoring.

## 7 Conclusion and outlook

This article elaborated only a few, selected insights from 17 narrative interviews within a sub-study on prospective mentors. It was embedded in a much broader, multi-method qualitative case study on a pilot project of youth mentoring for “unaccompanied refugee minors” in an Austrian region, starting in the “long summer of migration” in Europe in 2015<sup>[10]</sup>. Hence, en-

riching our own findings with those of closely connected studies, it is safe to say that (future or early) mentors do not only take the social environments of their mentees into account when considering possible obstacles, conditions and limitations for future relationships: they also consider their own, hitherto existing “personal life”<sup>[23]</sup>. Basualdo-Delmonico and Spencer showed how mentors’ values and views about mentoring (and about the families who were served by these programs) mediated the mentors’ perspective on their mentees<sup>[18]</sup>. Adding to this substantially, we were able to reveal that and how (prospective) mentors deal with both their biographies and social embeddedness to make sense of their (future) activity, thus already shaping their orientations in the relationships that later develop with a mentee.

### 7.1 Towards a heuristic, grounded extension of the mentoring concept

The findings of Basualdo-Delmonico and Spencer<sup>[18]</sup>, and of Colley<sup>[4]</sup>, suggest that a mentor’s view on his or her mentee’s social conditions and relatedness to others strongly informs what a mentor perceives as the needs or motivations he or she brings to the relationship and activities. Enhancing this view, heuristically it can be formulated that future mentors’ personal set-up is highly shaped by the ways they integrate their own biography and social environments into (self-oriented) meaning-making and social interactions. This happens long before the time when and far beyond the space where this “thing” that is normally called mentoring actually takes place.

My findings can certainly be considered persuasive evidence for a fundamental insight that requires further empirical testing and extends beyond this specific research project: that, empirically, youth mentoring cannot be seen as a singular, dyadic relationship. Instead, it should be reconstructed as an extended web of relationships, especially on the side of the mentors as well as at their various sites, *i.e.* where they locate and move. In many ways, it does not come about through matching or the “first date,” but is already constructed, processed, qualified and evaluated beforehand, or in the early stages before later volunteering as a mentor.

Based on this and as an orientation for future activities in research and theory, I make the following claim considering the relevance of these findings for the overall field of study: Current conceptualizations of, and subsequent research on, (youth) mentoring have to be extended in their temporal, spatial and social dimensions. Further, they also need to embrace the dimensions of biography and social network with regard to some of the actors involved. The very few examples using qualitative

longitudinal data on multiple actors, including on mentor matches (the “dyad”) and organizational environments, have shown the value of these approaches in data collection and analysis. Data from my ongoing sub-study using a narrative approach within a longitudinal analysis will add to existing knowledge. However, going far beyond what can generally be achieved when using a design and approach of this kind, not only the conceptual repertoire but also the traditional methods and designs in (qualitative) youth mentoring studies also have to be updated.

## 7.2 Towards an extension of methods and approaches in youth mentoring research

The social and biographical side of mentors and its impact on the construction and achievements of youth mentoring are largely unexplored fields of mentoring. I would go so far as to hypothesize that in order to dig deeper, it will not be enough to merely operationalize the social network dimension in established quantitative designs. Nor will it suffice to adapt what quantitative mentoring research in other fields factorized as various aspects of “antecedents” to the study of youth mentoring programs (see above in subsection 2.2). However, one way to include these dimensions in a more sophisticated way could be to combine qualitative ego-centered network analysis and narrative interviews within a “qualitative structural analysis” as proposed by Herz, Peters and Truschkat<sup>[34]</sup>, but using a longitudinal research design which collects data from several actors. For the mentors’ side, this could offer fresh knowledge not only through a processual dimension in analysis (*e.g.* a narrative, sequential analysis of experience), but by adding a processual dimension even at the stage of data collection. This would give us a more profound insight into how mentors’ biographies and current social embeddedness feed into their construction of mentoring and what might be achieved in it. In addition, and this seems vital to me, it would also allow us to “see” and understand that mentoring activities take place and relationships are shaped over time in a particular way, and to grasp how and possibly why that occurs.

Beyond this, there are also signs pointing towards future research tracks, connecting mentoring research to other fields of study. The strong biographical reflexivity of mentors that we were able to describe suggests that mentoring research could be connected to current efforts being made to grasp and understand how people *do* particular things, such as working on their biography or shaping their personal life. Based on the popularity of what some call the “practice turn”<sup>[35]</sup>, in biography and life course research, investigation has increas-

ingly focused on these “doings.” Hence, to truly examine the social practices that were only indirectly visible in the narrations of mentors in our investigation, mentoring research could be connected to a “doing transition” perspective<sup>[36]</sup> and to a perspective on “doing biography”<sup>[37]</sup>. In my view, and based on findings from other parts of our research, *e.g.* on mentor training<sup>[11,12]</sup>, this would clearly require multi-sited ethnographic and mobile research *inside* mentoring. This approach would require researchers to become more deeply involved in various parts of actors’ lives, the everyday activities of mentoring organizations and the institutional “culture” of social problems work in social services. This, however, could be inspired by innovations in mobility studies which could possibly show how mentoring simultaneously affects and effects physical/spatial, social and biographical mobilities.

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