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# On common ground, half full glasses and boundaries – Developing multi-perspectivity in research on social mentoring with refugees

## 1. Introduction

One of the starting points for our research activities in the field of social mentoring since the 'long summer of migration' (Hess et al., 2017) respectively the 'short summer of mercy' (Mecheril, 2020, p. 105) was an ongoing cooperation with a local volunteer agency in Cologne, Germany. Among other mentoring programmes, this agency organises and monitors so-called 'arrival sponsorships' (Schüler, 2020) for newly arrived (young) adults, including refugees. The cooperation initially revolved around university teaching: as part of a critical servicelearning seminar, students of educational science engage in social mentoring within their study programme – and therefore not entirely on a voluntary basis. They act as mentors, meeting with the mentees for three hours in three occasions, following the sponsorship concept mentioned above, spending time together on leisure activities, showing the newcomers their favourite places in the city and getting to know each other. To facilitate reflective processes, we requested that the students document their experiences in writing, using a portfolio[1]. Our research activities initially focused on the university students' experiences and educational processes, on reconstructing their perspectives on the migration and asylum regime, and on the power asymmetries in the mentoring relationships (see Fißmer et al., 2023 as well as 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The research was

soon expanded to include the perspectives and experiences of other actors taking part in social mentoring, namely mentors beyond service learning (Friedrich & Rosen, 2024), education professionals who set up, support and supervise social mentoring (Bauer et al., 2023) and mentees (Bauer & Rosen, 2022, Bauer et al., 2022). In this article we report on this process of developing multi-perspectivity in social mentoring research and present initial findings from our grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014) in relation to three different actor perspectives (for a discussion of the epistemological benefits of multiple perspectives in grounded theory research, see Breuer et al., 2019, p. 198).[2] Following the widespread understanding in qualitative research that 'all is data' (see Glaser, 2007), we therefore conducted a variety of empirical data and interview forms: These ranged from peer interviews with university students from our first cohorts in Cologne (n=11) to expert interviews with educational professionals (n=7), to 'classical' problem-centred interviews with mentees (n=1) and mentors (n=3)[3] according to Witzel (2000), using an interview guide, Additionally we held four focus group discussions with university students who participated in conceptually different critical service learning seminars in Cologne (four students in one discussion) and later in Landau (three discussions with eight students). We also analyzedstudent portfolios (n=29; 24 from Cologne and five from Landau). All empirical data has been collected in German, which is a barrier and a hindrance to the participation of field actors if they are not given the opportunity to switch to a language with which they feel more familiar or comfortable, depending on the subject of the interview.[4] We will outline further research perspectives in the conclusion. Before doing so, we would like to reflect on terminological considerations that have arisen during the research process so far.

Throughout our research, we have faced challenges with the

notion of sponsorship (in German: Patenschaft). On the one hand, sponsorship in German is the same word as godparenthood, suggesting a quasi-familial relationship. On the other hand, the term sponsorship reinforces existing structural asymmetry between the majority society and new immigrants due to restrictive immigration and residence laws, as well as the European migration regime. We have temporarily preferred the term *tandem relationship* to emphasise the equal footing of the actors involved and to understand their relationship as reciprocal rather than unidirectional – both partners benefit from each other, even if one supports and helps and the other accepts. This was combined with the term *tandem partner* to overcome a distinction between so-called volunteers and newcomers for two reasons. Firstly, all participants are engaged of their own volition, including not only the designated caregivers, but also those who primarily receive support within the relationship. Secondly, this term pairing implies a homogenising comparison between volunteers and newcomers, which was shown to be empirically unsustainable at the beginning of our project context, as there were also students in the critical service learning seminar who had only come to Germany to study and who described themselves as newcomers. In other words, the classification of volunteers and newcomers neglects the diversity that exists within the volunteer group and, therefore, reinforces a system of white dominance. We chose to employ the terms *mentor* and *mentee* to reduce the (re)production of ethnicising and reifying labels. Additionally, we use the term *social mentoring*, highlighting the mutuality of the relationship, which is part of Crijns and De Cuyper's working definition of social mentoring for newcomers:

*A person from the host society (mentor) provides guidance to a migrant newcomer (mentee), the objective of which is to support the*

*social participation and integration of the mentee. Both mentor and mentee voluntarily commit to this and establish contact on a regular basis. The relationship is initiated, facilitated, and supported by a third actor (organisation). While asymmetrical, the mentoring relationship is of a reciprocal nature. (Crijn & De Cuyper, 2022, p. 7)*

## 2. "I […] know all too well how difficult it can be to be treated equally here in German" – University students finding common ground within critical service learning

As part of our grounded theory study, the perspectives of university students involved as mentors in Critical Service Learning have so far been reconstructed on the basis of peer interviews. A key finding is that they are aware and problematise their unintended use of dominant positions and privileges such as residency status and access to higher education in Germany, in their encounters with mentees (see Fißmer et al., 2023). The analysis revealed the students' coping strategies for dealing with the power imbalances within the mentoring relationship: some tend to quasi-naturalise the roles, thereby normalising the asymmetrical relationship, e.g. by establishing a generational order of social mentoring relationships, while others emphasise equal treatment as a guiding principle to help create at least partial symmetry (Fißmer et al., 2023). Fißmer, Rosen and tom Dieck condense this into the category of "striving for (selective) symmetry through reference to the fairy tale of eye level" (2023, p. 131). They highlight students' awareness of the impossibility of overcoming structural inequalities caused by the migration regime (Pott et al., 2018) that privileges them. This adherence to the maxim of equality translates into a struggle to liquefy or shift the asymmetrical relationship within social mentoring. While elaborating this finding through

additional data sources, specifically the students' portfolios[5], it was noticeable that out of a total of 29 portfolios, nine of the students referred to personal experiences of migration and multilingualism when reflecting on their participation in critical service learning. We were interested in exploring when and on what occasions students proactively mentioned their own and/or their family's migration experiences and/or their multilingualism as being important in engaging with mentees. In this section, we will take up this question, as there is a lack of research on service learning approaches that embrace the diversity of the seminar and reconsider whether existing pedagogies remain relevant and meaningful for all students (for exceptions, see e.g. Castrellón & Pérez-Torres, 2018; Pak, 2016; Schell et al., 2022; Shadduck- Hernández, 2006; Wightman, 2019).

One phenomenon turned out of the students' portfolios was that they put themselves in the mentees' shoes and argued that they had a deep understanding of being discriminated against and subject to restrictive immigration laws, partly because of their own or their families' experiences of being marginalised and othered as migrants (on othering see Said, 1987). One student expressed this as follows:

"*I myself come from a family with a migrant background and know all too well how difficult it can be to be treated equally here in Germany (…)*" *(Portfolio of Charlotte, p. 6)*

We called this phenomenon 'mentors finding common ground in mentoring relationships'. While such a connection can be valuable from the mentors' point of view, there is a risk of over-generalisation: students may prematurely assume that their

experiences are similar to those of mentees and therefore feel like experts. This can disrupt the balance within the mentoring relationship that has been created by finding common ground beforehand and turn it back into an asymmetry. However, we also find examples of students creating common ground by emphasising similarities in religious belonging while pointing out differences in religious practices between mentees and mentors. An example of this can be seen in the following portfolio excerpt:

"*Rabia, like me, is a Muslim woman. She wears a headscarf and I do not. However, this was not an issue in any way. I wasn't looked down upon by her for not wearing one and she wasn't looked down upon by me for wearing one. It's up to each person and I think Rabia feels the same way I do*" *(Portfolio by Mina, p. 12)*

Mina emphasises that wearing a headscarf is "not an issue" for her and her mentee. This could be interpreted as  ermany, where wearing the hijab is highly politicised and 'an issue'. By stating that it is not an issue in their relationship, Mina puts herself and the mentee on the same page and establishes a common ground.

Mina's assumption that Rabia shares her feelings could also be interpreted as an over-generalisation and therefore a paternalistic act. Such a tendency can also be reconstructed in the following section. However, it takes on a different dimension through the reproduction of stereotypes:

*"I found it somehow refreshing to see that the family members had such a different sense of time as we do here in Germany. I know 'this other time management' from my Congolese father very well and therefore felt directly at ease" (Portfolio of Charlotte, p. 6).*

In this case, finding a common ground in a mentor relationship is closely linked to culturalised attributions, both in terms of self-ethnicisation and external-ethnicisation. The student mentor's attempt to bond with the mentee by referring to an assumed shared understanding of differences in "time management" may unintentionally perpetuate cultural stereotypes that exoticize and essentialise ethnic groups, including her own. However, from the mentor's perspective, this contributes to the maintenance of the relationship. Other mentors may be deterred by differing perceptions of timing, but Charlotte felt comfortable. This raises questions about the practices of othering that the student may have experienced herself. It appears that she has internalised this and somehow normalised being judged, for instance, for having a way of managing time that is said to be deviant from the homogenised majority.

Another level of finding common ground in mentoring relationships is demonstrated by another student who speaks the same language as her mentees:

*"It means a lot to me to be able to support this family. It was the first time in my life that my mother tongue could be used for a good cause. I was very grateful and looked forward to the next meeting" (Portfolio of Tiana, p. 5)*

The student reflects on the empowerment she feels when she can use her family language to support the mentees. The mentor lives in a country where her family language is not widely spoken, perhaps only in private settings. The expressions she used to describe the encounter sheds light on how some languages are mar-

ginalised and object of linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015). The claim that her family language was used for the first time "for a good cause" in the context of social mentoring could be read as an internalisation of experienced devaluation of this language in terms of its usefulness in the past. So the mentor views the use of her family language outside of a personal, but more academic context, and also to support a refugee family, in a very positive light. The willingness of the mentor to continue the relationship may indicate that meeting at the same language level helps to establish an equal footing and that they can develop a better understanding of each other and a closer bond.

Additional studies highlight that students from migrant backgrounds who have participated in servicen learning with refugees have reported experiencing identity affirmation and acceptance through interactions with refugees from similar ethno-cultural backgrounds (Shadduck-Hernández, 2006, p. 77). They also indicated that they learned more about the historical contexts and social problems of their communities, which gave them space to improve their critical thinking skills and engage in social activism (Pak, 2016, p. 10; Schell et al., 2022, p. 71; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2006, p. 79). Following Castrellón's (2018) emphasis on acknowledging diversity in critical service learning seminars, especially in relation to the communities being served, we plan to conduct further research. Our aim is to enhance a research strand on service learning that has not yet been adapted for a diverse student body (Wightman, 2019). Research in this field shows that service learning can foster students' empathy and decentering, as well as so-called multicultural competence and intercultural understanding (De Leon, 2014, p. 26; Dull, 2009, p. 56; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016, p. 169; Tinkler et al., 2017, p. 6).

## 3. "The glass is either half full or half empty […] I would see the glass half full" – A mentee's pragmatic view of hierarchical structures in mentoring relationships

As we want to shed light on mentoring relationships from different perspectives, we have also focused on the refugees' perspective. So far, our data corpus contains only one problem-centered interview (Witzel, 2000) with a refugee who met a student from the service learning seminar through participation in a language café and began a mentoring relationship with her. In addition, our data analysis includes three interviews with mentees that were conducted as part of a master's thesis (see Bauer, 2021; 2024). Verena Bauer is currently conducting further interviews with refugees as part of her PhD. In our analysis so far, we have focused on asymmetries of power and asked the following questions (see Bauer 2021, Bauer et al., 2022; Bauer & Rosen, 2022): from the perspective of mentees participating in different forms of mentoring relationships, what factors reinforce or reduce asymmetries of power within these meetings? How do they cope with asymmetries of power?

There are differences in recognising and dealing with asymmetries of power between different actors in a mentoring relationship, which we would like to illustrate with an excerpt from the interview with the mentee Dabir. He comments on and reinterprets a situation described by a student participant of the service-learning seminar. In the interview, Dabir says that he does not feel any imbalance of power in his relationship with his student mentor. He sees the relationship as equal. This is in strong contrast to the experiences of the student mentors interviewed, who experience asymmetries of power in many situations and feel uncomfortable

as a consequence (Fißmer et al., 2022). Therefore, the interviewer tells him about a situation described by a participant of the service learning seminar: together with her mentee who was interested in studying, the mentor attended a counseling session at a university and found it negative and patronising that the academic counsellor spoke primarily to her and not to the tandem mentee.

*I: "And then the employee from the university talked only with the tandem partner, not with the person, that wanted to actually start studying there and who was seeking information. The interviewee said, that was lousy. […]" D: "When you ask about this subject, I will say, I always see half full. The glass is either half full or half empty. If we think the glass is half empty, we express ourselves like that. But when we think half full, the employee maybe thought that the person doesn't understand very well, so it's better to talk to the German, because she can explain to her tandem partner better the ideas, the rules, the laws […]. That is not easy for the student, because she wants to start study here to understand better. If you ask me, I think the employee thought it is better to talk to the German, and then she could explain it later to her tandem partner. […] If I were there, I would see the glass half full". (Interview with Dabir, 19.03.2022)*

Dabir explains the counsellor's behaviour by saying that she did not address the mentee and therefore not the prospective student, but the mentor, because the latter had a better know-ledge of German and could pass on the information later. In this way, Dabir does not deny the negative aspects, but proposes a strictly pragmatic interpretation in which the subordination is not evaluated negatively with regard to linguistic resources. This can be interpreted as a strategy for dealing with subordination, which also helps in the interview to appear as an actor who is not only at the mercy of the given circumstances, but who is also regaining control

within the oppressive migration regime. By doing so, he remains capable of acting and therefore regains agency. This pragmatic evaluation links in with the findings of other studies that have found, for example, that feelings of helplessness and dependence on others are common from the refugees' point of view and that they are dependent on the help of others 'like a child' especially at the beginning of their stay in Germany (SVR-Forschungsbereich, 2017, p. 72). However, it is precisely this dependence that opens the door to the reproduction of power inequalities in such relationships, as studies with focus on hierarchies have analysed: care relationships tend to remain unequal over time, hindering refugees' independence and autonomy (Vogler et al., 2022, p. 147). Structural inequalities persist in the dynamic n mentors and mentees with one who offers help and one who needs to be helped[6] (Stock, 2019, p. 129). Nevertheless, our example and the different evaluations of mentors and mentees show that looking at social mentorships from different perspectives is important, especially since the perspective of mentees is still underrepresented in research so far. This was stressed by the international literature review conducted by Sara Ismailaj in the context of her bachelor thesis (Ismailaj, 2022). In the future, we aim to address this research desideratum.

## 4. "You have to really very clearly tell them, yes, stop, right" – Professionals stressing the importance of boundaries in social mentoring

Through our work with volunteer agencies as part of our Critical Service Learning seminars, we remain in constant contact with professionals who organise and supervise social mentoring. Our interest in their thoughts on the relationship between men-

tors and mentees grew, so we decided to conduct problem-centred expert interviews (Döringer, 2021). We define them as experts due to their specific knowledge in this field and potential impact on mentors and mentees actions (Bogner et al., 2018). We were interested to learn which tasks and challenges as well as potential they see in establishing, organising and supporting social mentorships under the conditions of the migration regime.

So far, we conducted seven expert interviews with pedagogical professionals. Four of them accompany short term mentorships as mentioned above. Three interviewees supervise vocational training mentorships (so called 'Ausbildungspatenschaften') in which mentors help young people to find a vocational training place in a company or an organisation. The diverse focus of these social mentoring projects presents an opportunity for our research to gain differentiated insights into general challenges in the organisation of social mentoring and specific challenges of such projects in the field of forced migration. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online over the last three years due to the Covid 19 pandemic (Bauer et al., 2023).

One key topic in the interviews was setting boundaries as can be seen for example in this excerpt from Vera:

*"You have to really very clearly tell them [the mentors], yes, stop, right? It runs after agreement and starts rather slowly than everything all at once and then, uhm, you are burned out after a month. And uhm don't know where to go, right? There are volunteers who then uhm do things day and night" (Interview with Vera, 22.03.2023)*

She characterises the mentors as very committed, expressed by describing them as working 'day and night', and emphasises the importance of setting boundaries to prevent them from feeling overwhelmed. This could, as we know from other sequences, eventually lead to dropping out of the project and is similarly discussed in international studies (McAllum, 2018, p. 12). Mentors and mentees in the arrival sponsorships in our sample did not mention feeling overwhelmed by the commitment, which could be related to the clearly limited time frame, as Schüler (2020) points out in his evaluation study of the programme (p. 292). Vera's claim to be able to assess the needs and experiences of the mentees is presumably based on extensive experience, but can be read as paternalistic. At the same time, professionals problematise paternalistic wording used by mentors when talking about their mentees:

*"When someone tells you about the tandem partnership and says: 'My refugee'. There are two things I have to criticise right? So first: 'My' and then the word: 'Refugee'" (Interview with Alina, 10.02.2022)*

"'*My refugee' says one person again and again. And I'm on it, over and over again" (Interview with Deniz, 08.10.2021)*

By stating that she has to criticise paternalistic wording such as "my refugee"[7] and that she "is on it" Alina positions herself as being responsible for problematising power imbalances within social mentoring and also capable of articulating such criticism. This is remarkable, given that professionals are fundamentally dependent on the willingness of volunteers to continue cooperation (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013, p. 417). The promotion of reciprocal relationships in which unequal power positions are at least reflected can be reconstructed as the goal of professional

support in social mentoring, which Deniz pursues vigorously, "over and over again" if necessary.

In line with the idea of reciprocal relationships, 'help for self-help' is outlined as another maxime within social mentoring. One professional describes how she reminds mentees of this principle:

*"There is often an expectation like: 'Write the application.' @right?@ So, first one has to say: 'No, it doesn't work like that now, right? It's help for self-help, it's you that has to write the application'". (Interview with Almut, 24.03.2023)*

Almut recounts a dialogue with a mentee, illustrating how she communicates the principle of "help for self-help" directly. She clearly states the limits of support within the relationship and invites the mentee to take on responsibility. Such interventions by professionals to clarify the often complex and ambiguous roles within social mentorship are also reported in other studies (Schott-Leser, 2018, p. 290; Studer & Schnurbein, 2013, p. 415). At the same time, the discussion of the need for professional support for volunteering is considered as a measure to ensure the governability of civic engagement for refugees (Fleischmann, 2019, p. 70).

The professionals report repeatedly about intervening in social mentoring by talking to both mentors and mentees. To set boundaries seems to be of major importance regarding different dimensions: limits of engagement in the interview excerpt from Vera, limits of appropriation in the interview excerpt from Alina and Deniz and limits of support in the interview excerpt from Almut. As a research-guiding hypothesis for future in-depth analyses, we can state here that in all of these contexts the professionals want

to ensure both sustainability and symmetry in social mentoring by referring to limits: In Vera's case by avoiding overburdening and thus a possible drop-out of the mentors, in Alina's case by pointing to paternalistic attitudes to deconstruct asymmetric relationships and in Almut's case by aiming to achieve independence for the mentees in the long run.

## 5. Conclusion

In our current qualitative research on social mentoring for newcomers, we have achieved multi-perspectivity by reconstructing the perspectives of different field actors: mentors, mentees and educational professionals such as social workers. Additionally, multi-perspectivity can be attained through the incorporation of diverse scientific disciplines and through international comparison. In the future, we intend to enhance multi-perspectivity by collaborating with field actors during the research process. This requires the implementation of a participatory research approach (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), which seeks to include field actors in the analysis of empirical data who so far have only been interviewed.

## Endnotes

1 Portfolios can broadly be defined, according to Paulson et al. (1991), as a purposeful collection of student work that represents the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas. They can be used as an instrument for reflection, career guidance, and formative and summative assessment (Beishuizen et al., 2006). In our service learning seminars, students are required to create a reflective portfolio (see Smith and Tillema (2003) for different types of portfolios). This portfolio focuses on the process rather than the product: Students are asked to describe how they have carried out their tasks, such as building and maintaining relationships with mentees, rather than simply what they did. A reflective portfolio links a personal learning diary with theoretically guided reflection.

2 For methodological reflections on conducting educational research within the migration regime see Khakpour and Rosen (2022) and tom Dieck and Rosen (2024) with regard to Grounded Theory.

3 Specifically, this is an individual interview and a pair interview. The latter was conducted with two interviewers, as we have done for interview training on other occasions during data collection.

4 As such, the extracts from interviews and portfolios below are translations into English. Additionally, pseudonyms are used for the names of the students, mentees, and mentors.

5 See Schallies (2016) for portfolios as a data source in qualitative research.

6 Professionals are also aware of this challenge and focus their support work for the participants on getting them to set boundaries and thereby achieve sustainable independence for the refugees, as our analysis of our interviews with professionals shows.

7 Interestingly, the exact same phenomenon of volunteers using the expression "my refugee" is mentioned and problematised in Anke Freuwörts study aswell (Freuwört, 2022, p. 272).

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