

Academic Paper

Matching mentors and recent immigrants: matching criteria in social mentoring programmes for newcomers

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Abstract

To improve the social participation of newcomer immigrants, social mentoring programs for newcomers have gained in popularity. This paper attempts to bring some clarity to the practice of social mentoring for newcomers by focusing on an important step in the mentoring process: matching. Through insights from practice, this research provides an overview of the most common matching criteria in social mentoring programs for newcomers. Criteria include, participants' needs, goals, skills, expectations, interests, language, age and gender. The findings provide important insights for policy and practice and offer a solid starting point for further empirical research into matching migrant newcomers.

Keywords

matching, mentoring, immigrants, integration, criteria

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Introduction

Social participation is considered a key dimension of successful migrant integration. Yet, host countries often prioritise the labour market integration of newcomers. To address the need for social participation initiatives, social mentoring programs for newcomers have proliferated in many migrant-receiving countries in recent years, especially in response to the refugee crisis, and are known by a multitude of names including 'buddy programs', 'parrainage', and 'patenschaften.' While initially driven by civil society, this intervention has become increasingly institutionalised in some European countries as exemplified by its prominent role in Flemish integration policy which will go into effect in September 2022 and seeks to strengthen newcomers' social network and participation with the help of, among other options, social mentoring. In this respect social mentoring will become a formal part of integration policies (Reidsma & De Cuyper, 2021).

With the proliferation of social mentoring programs for newcomers, there is a need to delineate the concept and to gain a better understanding of best practices. Extant literature on mentoring tends to focus on more established forms of mentoring such as youth mentoring (Lester et al., 2019; Martin & Sifers, 2012), workplace mentoring (Hieker & Rushby, 2020; Parise & Forret, 2008; Allen et al., 2006; Eby & Lockwood, 2005), student mentoring (Skaniakos & Piirainen, 2019) and more recently, mentoring to work (De Cuyper et al., 2019; Weiss & Tulin, 2019; Månsson & Delander, 2017). While social mentoring for newcomers shares similarities with other forms of mentoring, its unique objectives and challenges necessitate a deeper exploration of its particularities and existing practices to establish a common ground and better inform future policy, practice and research.

One key dimension of social mentoring for newcomers that is crucially important yet hardly studied is the process by which newcomers are matched with volunteers from the host society. Research has found that matching has a significant impact on the outcome of formal mentoring programs (Hale, 2000), and the quality of the match, or the lack thereof, can significantly impact both mentor and mentee (Cox, 2005). According to Menges (2016), formal mentoring programs should try to approximate the natural attraction present in informal mentoring relationships. While it is difficult if not impossible to account for all factors that create a connection or attraction between two people, programs can match participants in a manner that resembles or at least facilitates natural attraction and, in doing so, contribute to a more successful mentoring relationship.

In general, studies on matching are limited and often focus on other types of mentoring such as student mentoring (Menges, 2016; Kanchewa et al., 2014; Blake-Beard et al., 2011; Campbell & Campbell, 2007), youth mentoring (Raposa et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2019), and mentoring to work (Neuwirth & Wahl, 2017; Cox, 2005). They tend to offer different and at times contradictory results on the impact of specific matching criteria on the mentoring relationship and do not offer a comprehensive overview of the matching criteria commonly used in practice. Since matching is informed by the objectives, needs and context of the mentoring relationship and its participants, it does not suffice to use extant research to inform matching in social mentoring programs for newcomers. Instead, we set out to explore the perspectives of organisations that offer such programs and identify which matching criteria are most used in social mentoring programs for newcomers. Such knowledge could provide researchers with a better understanding of a relatively new and minimally studied form of mentoring and inform both policy and practice with relevant insights and best practices.

Social mentoring for newcomers: defining a new concept

As a new and emerging field of mentoring, there is a need to define and demarcate the concept of social mentoring for newcomers. While general definitions of mentoring offer a starting point, the unique challenges, objectives, and context of social mentoring for newcomers demand a definition that distinguishes it from other types of mentoring and bring together under one umbrella those initiatives that seek to facilitate the social integration of newcomer immigrants.

Even though there is no single definition of mentoring, one of the more traditional and generally applicable definitions defines mentoring as “a transformative relationship in which an experienced person helps a less experienced person realize their personal and professional goals” (Kram, 1985; Levinson, 1978, in Yip & Kram, 2017, p. 88).

Many researchers have built and expanded on this definition though some defining characteristics remain similar across the diverse range of definitions. De Cuyper et al. (2019) identified seven ‘building blocks’ for migrant mentoring to work, which also provide useful insights for our research. The seven key attributes are:

1. The mentor has more knowledge and experience about a set objective than the mentee
2. The mentoring relationship facilitates the growth of the mentee

3. The mentoring relationship has an objective that is clear to both parties
4. The relationship between the mentor and mentee is the active ingredient of mentoring and while not a goal itself, it is a pre-condition necessary to work towards other objectives
5. The mentor and mentee voluntarily commit to the mentoring relationship
6. While asymmetrical, the mentoring relationship is reciprocal in nature
7. A third actor (organisation) facilitates and supervises the mentoring relationship

Using the seven building blocks, De Cuyper et al. (2019, p. 117) arrive at the following definition of migrant mentoring to work:

A person with more localised experience (mentor) provides guidance to a person with less experience (mentee), the objective of which is to support the mentee in making sustainable progress in his or her journey into the labour market. 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.

Through our research into social mentoring programs for newcomers, we find that all seven attributes are supported by practitioners. Another interesting definition is the one used by Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis (2018) who define social mentoring programs as “those programs that encourage new peer or group relationships with the aim of influencing the social inclusion of people who are at risk of social exclusion” (p. 151).

Taking these definitions which are applicable to a similar target group (De Cuyper et al., 2019) and type of mentoring (Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis, 2018), we can begin to formulate a definition for social mentoring for migrant newcomers. To distinguish the definition of social mentoring for newcomers from other forms of mentoring, we further specify its target groups (members of the host society and migrant newcomers) as well as its overarching goal (to support the social participation and integration of the mentee). In doing so, we arrive at the following definition for 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.

The matching process

Research has found that the matching process has a significant impact on the success of formal mentoring programs (Allen et al., 2009; Hale, 2000). While a good match can result in a successful mentoring relationship and positive outcomes, a mismatch can significantly lessen the benefits of mentoring or even do harm with participants reporting stress and intentions to terminate the mentoring relationship (Eby & Allen, 2002). To avoid such negative outcomes, “it is of critical importance to match mentors and protégés in ways that resemble or at least facilitate some of the natural attraction that drives informal mentoring relationships” (Menges, 2016, p. 100). One of the most important questions for mentoring programs is thus which matching criteria contribute to a successful mentoring relationship.

Extant literature offers some insights into the best matching criteria though results are mostly limited to youth mentoring, student mentoring, and mentoring at work. Matching criteria that have been discussed extensively are sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity. Yet, conclusions on their effectiveness as matching criteria differ. While some research has shown that sociodemographic similarities such as ethnicity, race, and gender contribute to

longer and more successful mentoring relationships (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Raposa et al., 2019), other research finds no correlation (Eby et al., 2013) or only for some sociodemographic characteristics and mentoring outcomes (Blake-Beard et al., 2011; Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Lankau et al., 2005; Neuwirth & Wahl, 2017).

In addition to sociodemographic characteristics, research on matching criteria has also focused on so-called 'deep-level' characteristics such as personality, interests, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Eby et al., 2013; Madia & Lutz, 2004; Menges, 2016). In comparison with more surface-level characteristics such as gender and race, deep-level similarities demonstrate stronger positive effects on the mentoring relationship. Deep-level similarities (or perceptions thereof) have been found to positively influence perceptions of support and the relationship quality (Eby et al., 2013; Menges, 2016), satisfaction and effectiveness of the program (Neuwirth & Wahl, 2017), and mentor's intention to remain in the mentoring relationship (Madia & Lutz, 2004).

Some research has also tried to determine the importance of practical considerations such as geographical location and time availability to the mentoring relationship. According to Eby et al. (2013), interaction frequency strongly correlates with mentees' perceptions of relationship quality, especially in terms of psychosocial support. Other studies have further confirmed the importance of considering geographical location and time availability during the matching process (Eby & Lockwood, 2005) with Cox (2005) even arguing that, through the careful selection and training of mentors, matching is only necessary in terms of participants' geographical location and time availability.

A final recurring topic in the literature on matching pertains to the involvement of mentors and mentees in the matching process. Programs that allow some input from mentors and mentees report greater commitment to the relationship, more willingness to spend time together, greater ability to work through conflict, and increased interest in maintaining the relationship after the conclusion of the mentoring program (Blake-Beard et al., 2007). Input has further been shown to positively influence perceptions of program effectiveness, mentor commitment, and program understanding (Allen et al., 2006). The importance of soliciting input from participants has been further underscored by Drew et al. (2020), Menges (2016), and Wanberg et al. (2003).

Despite the existing research on matching, little is known about the matching process and criteria in social mentoring initiatives and the matching of volunteers with adult newcomer immigrants. In fact, even though social mentoring initiatives for newcomers are an increasingly popular approach to support migrant integration, no research has so far been conducted into the matching in such initiatives. While research on matching in other types of mentoring can offer insights for social mentoring, the unique challenges, objectives, context, and target group of social mentoring for newcomers necessitate more targeted research. This article therefore aims to offer a first overview of the most common and relevant matching criteria for social mentoring for newcomers, as identified by practitioners.

Methodology

To explore the most common matching criteria for mentoring for newcomers, this article builds on qualitative data collected as part of the two-year EU-funded ORIENT8 project which aims to develop smart social mentoring programs in three municipalities in Belgium, Greece, and Sweden. ^[1] During the first phase of the project, the authors conducted a literature review and a scan of existing programs in Flanders to inform the development of the ORIENT8 mentoring programs. Data gathered during this initial phase provide the basis for this article.

Data sampling

For the purpose of our research, we adopted a maximum variation purposive sampling method. Our aim was to include a diverse range of social mentoring programs targeted at newcomers to gain a broad and comprehensive understanding of matching practices. Data was collected in Flanders, Belgium, one of the pioneering regions in the field of social mentoring for newcomers. In selecting our cases, we specifically sought to include established programs to ensure that their input was based on considerable prior experience. Further factors that were considered to ensure sufficient variation include the size of the municipality the program was operating in were: the governance of the project (NGO, local government, network of actors); target group (newcomers in general, families, asylum seekers in reception centres) and type of mentoring (focused on cultural activities, learning language, sports, emotional support, practical and administrative assistance etc). While all programs identify as social mentoring programs and specifically target newcomers, they vary significantly.

Data collection

For each of our 10 cases, we interviewed the project coordinator and, when applicable, other staff. Due to the small size and limited funds of most social mentoring programs, the coordinator was often the only (paid) staff member. Consequently, we interviewed a total of 17 members of staff for our 10 cases. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between April and August 2021. Specifically, we asked about their own matching approach and asked more targeted questions to gather their insights on common matching criteria found in the scientific literature on matching. In addition to the 17 interviews, we also received documents from each of the 10 programs. Such documents include intake forms, recruitment materials, information brochures and leaflets, newsletters, grant applications, and materials for information dissemination and training sessions, some of which the authors also attended online.

Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously. We continued collecting data about matching criteria until no new criteria emerged. We then coded the data and conducted a thematic analysis in order to identify common themes and patterns.

In addition to our main data sources, we cross checked our findings with data from a 'learning network' of social mentoring projects (19) and other participation initiatives in Belgium (Briones Alonso et al., 2023). The network supported pilot projects and gathered experiences and knowledge to help municipalities and other actors prepare for and implement a new Belgian policy in 2022 which seeks to strengthen newcomers' social network and increase their participation in society through mentoring, internships, volunteering, and other similar initiatives. We consulted notes from three learning network meetings as well as experiences, insights, and documents shared with the researchers and on the network's digital sharing platform. This data helped us to check for additional or diverging information. No additional matching criteria were found based on these data.

Finding the right match: matching criteria for social mentoring for newcomers

In this section, we present the most important matching criteria for social mentoring for newcomers as identified by practitioners. While most of the literature on matching criteria focuses on mentoring at work, mentoring to work, youth mentoring or student mentoring, social mentoring programs for newcomers can and often do adopt similar criteria. They use a variety of matching criteria, of which some are supported by the research literature and are common across different types of mentoring. Other criteria have either produced conflicting results in terms of the mentoring relationship and program's success or have until now not been discussed in the academic literature.

It should be noted that while the mentoring programs all mentioned at least some of the matching criteria below, the extent to which such criteria are used in practice depends on the availability of mentors and mentees at any given time. Most of the programs are relatively small (ranging from ~20 to 140 participants, though consider that the number of candidates available for matching at any given time will be much less) and are not able to take a multitude of criteria into account due to their limited 'supply' of candidates. Staff usually consider the most relevant criteria, for example if a candidate has a non-negotiable preference e.g., for a same gender-match, this criterion might be prioritized.

The matching criteria are split into three categories: mentee-specific criteria, mentor-specific criteria, and general criteria, the last of which are used for both mentor and mentee candidates. An overview of the different criteria can be found in table 1.

Table 1: Matching Criteria

| |
|---|
| Mentee specific criteria The mentee's request: needs and goals |
| Mentor specific criteria The mentor's offer: knowledge skills and professional background |
| General criteria Expectations Interests and hobbies Language skills Practical considerations Preferences: age, gender and family Personality |

Mentee-specific criteria

The mentee's request: needs and goals

The main, overarching objective of social mentoring programs for newcomers is to support the integration and social participation of newcomers in their host society. While the mentoring relationship is reciprocal, the mentee's integration is the ultimate goal of the mentoring programs, and their needs and goals thus take priority. Coordinators stressed the importance of spending adequate time mapping out a mentee's needs and goals to ensure the best possible match.

Coordinators identify mentees' needs and goals during an intake interview (n=8) and/or via an intake form (n=10), most of the programs use both. The interview includes questions such as 'what do you need help with?' and 'what do you hope to achieve during the mentoring program?' Some program coordinators and staff also talk with other professionals such as a mentee's social work and/or referrer to ascertain what the mentee's needs are. Having a clear understanding of such needs also helps coordinators in the assistance they offer to the mentor, who can thus be informed of the mentee's needs before the relationship commences and can, if necessary, be given concrete tools and training sessions.

Common needs and goals in social mentoring programs include practicing the local language, getting to know the city, expanding their social network, receiving administrative and practical assistance (e.g., help with documents, access to services, finding housing etc.), or simply spending leisure time together and engaging in social activities.

It should be noted that while mentee candidates are able to formulate their own needs and goals, they of course need to fall within the boundaries of social mentoring in general and the individual programs. The needs and goals considered during the matching phase are thus circumscribed by the formal objectives of each mentoring program.

Mentor-specific criteria

The mentor's offer: knowledge, skills, and professional background

To match a mentee to a mentor based on their needs and goals, program coordinators also have to consider what the mentor brings to the table. While social mentoring does not require mentors to have professional experience to participate, a specific background or skillset can prove useful depending on the needs of the mentee. One mentor argued that their professional background in special needs education made it easier for them to communicate with newcomers without a common language as they were able to fall back on certain 'tools' and 'strategies' used in special needs education to communicate non-verbally with their mentees.

While a mentor's professional background may thus be relevant, everyday knowledge actually has particular relevance to social mentoring. Some mentor candidates are, for example, very familiar with the local housing market, the school system and children's services, or local sports facilities and social clubs. Project coordinators try to match this knowhow to the needs and goals of a mentee and have thus matched mentors with children who know a lot about regional schools and services for families with mentees who need assistance with childcare, finding their way to relevant services and facilities, homework, accessing the right schools, etcetera. While a mentor's professional background may be relevant, it is thus particularly the everyday knowledge of mentors that proves useful in social mentoring.

General criteria

Expectations

For a match to be successful, the expectations of the mentor and mentee need to align. Incompatible expectations set a relationship up for failure and lead to frustration or, in the worst case, early termination. Common utterances on the part of mentors and, in exceptional circumstances, reasons for premature termination of some mentoring relationships, were 'the mentee asks too much of me' or 'the mentee asks something I do not want to or cannot help with'. To illustrate, one of the coordinators offers the following example:

There are a number of mentees whose main concern was housing and then you match someone with them who is less interested in that, and you notice that the mentor just doesn't really like it anymore. That can also be because when you did the intake and the matching, the housing element wasn't really a concern yet but suddenly it is, you know? And then there is just not really a match.

To avoid this, program coordinators stress the importance of gaining a good understanding of the expectations of participants. Most programs use intake interviews and forms to figure out what the mentee candidate requires, and the mentor candidate is willing and able to help with. One of the mentoring programs even differentiates between different types of mentors: welcome mentor, housing mentor, general mentor, language mentor, leisure mentor, and 'other'. Mentees can indicate what type of mentor they are looking for and mentors can choose the type of mentor they would like to be. Based on their answers, the coordinator then makes a first selection of possible matches.

Programs that do not make such a clear distinction between different types of mentoring still try to take candidates' expectations into consideration though the importance of this criterion also depends on how clearly defined the needs of the mentee and offer of the mentor are. If a mentee's needs are very specific and targeted, for example if they only need assistance with finding housing, ensuring a good fit between the needs of the mentee and the offer of the mentor is necessary to avoid conflict, loss of interest, and dissatisfaction with the mentoring program. If a mentee's needs

are more general, other matching criteria become more important. The importance of this matching criteria is thus dependent on the specificity with which participants define their expectations.

Interests and hobbies

In the coordinator's pursuit of a good match, deep-level factors such as interests and hobbies can often be decisive. In the context of social mentoring, interests and hobbies are more relevant to consider than in many other forms of mentoring such as mentoring at work or school, where the relationship between mentor and mentee takes place in a more professional setting (Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Hieker & Rushby, 2020; Skaniakos & Piirainen, 2019). The informal nature of the social interaction between mentor and mentee is in fact one of the ways in which social mentoring sets itself apart from other, more traditional forms of mentoring.

Mentors and mentees with similar interests and hobbies are expected to connect more easily than those who do not share common interests. While it may not guarantee a connection or mutual chemistry, it can be a good place to start as explained by one coordinator who argues that matching "based on hobbies seems easier, the easiest, because then they immediately have something in common to start off with." Sharing an interest in sports, arts, reading or nature immediately provides candidates with activities and places to explore. One coordinator was able to match two newcomers who both paint with a local artist who signed up as a mentor. Their common interest created an easy connection, and the mentor was even able to offer practical assistance and helped the newcomers to exhibit their work locally, thereby also facilitating deeper connections between the newcomers and the local community. Another mentor found a connection with their mentee through their shared interest in art:

The first activity that we did together [...] was go to the museum of fine arts. And that was really cool, I actually didn't expect it at all, but they were able to tell me a lot about what was on display, and they had never seen those paintings before. They knew a lot of those Biblical figures in paintings. I thought that was incredible. I didn't know that at all, that there was such a connection between the Islamic world and the Christian world, dating back hundreds of years. And they understood a lot of the figures on there, they could tell me things about them that I didn't know. I'm very interested in art myself so that was coincidentally something where we thought: here is a link, and a link you don't expect either. And that's happened quite often.

Coordinators note that a common interest or hobby can also help with the language constraints that are common in mentor-mentee duos in mentoring for newcomers. In case the mentor and mentee do not have a language in common or the mentee has only a limited understanding of the local language, having a hobby such as biking or painting in common can facilitate the mentor-mentee relationship and allow for informal and more intuitive language learning.

Language skills

Social mentoring for newcomers is unique among mentoring initiatives in that it brings together two or more people who do not necessarily speak the same language. In other types of mentoring such as student mentoring or mentoring at work, where the goal is not integration but, among others, professional advancement, mentors and mentees need to speak the same language to achieve their goals. In such programs, language skills might more often be used as a selection criterion rather than a matching criterion (see for example: Neuwirth & Wahl, 2017). As new immigrants, mentees in social mentoring programs for newcomers usually do not speak the local language and if they do, they are most commonly at a beginner level. This brings with it unique challenges and a need to consider language skills when matching mentors and mentees.

While coordinators of social mentoring programs for newcomers request and record candidates' language skills, their relevance as a matching criteria differs from program to program. Due to the objective of social mentoring for newcomers i.e., supporting the social participation and integration

of newcomers, some programs choose to match mentors and mentees who lack a common language to stimulate the mentee's process of learning the local language, though this does come with its own challenges as language barriers often lead to miscommunication and will typically hinder the development of a deeper connection and long-lasting relationship.

Some programs choose to prioritise other objectives over language learning and thus allow matches between candidates who share a common language, as explained by one coordinator:

I have now paired two people, someone from Angola so they speak Portuguese and a bit of Spanish and French, and I have a mentor who also speaks Spanish and French. So, we said 'ok the Dutch will come later but we'll start with French and Spanish, and it will slowly grow from there.

While this does not prevent the mentee from learning the local language, it does often delay or hamper this process as the ease of communicating reduces the need to learn the local language quickly. Whether language is considered as a matching criterion thus depends on the objectives of both the mentoring program and the participants.

Practical considerations

For a mentoring relationship to be successful, mentors and mentees need to meet regularly. Programs thus take practical consideration such as availability (do the timetables of mentor and mentee align so they can meet regularly?) and geographical location (do mentor and mentee live near each other?) into account when matching mentors and mentees. While such factors are relevant in any mentoring program, as shown in previous research (Eby et al., 2013; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Cox, 2005), the particularities of social mentoring for newcomers further emphasise the importance of taking such practical considerations into account.

Since social mentoring for newcomers seeks to support the integration of newcomers, coordinators prefer to match mentees with mentors who live in the same municipality to ensure they have a good understanding of the local culture, customs, services, and other location-specific knowledge that they can then pass on to their mentee. Geographical distance also comes with more practical hurdles as mentors and mentees must travel longer to see each other, requiring more time in their timetables and thus potentially reducing the number of times duos will be able to meet in person.

Knowing the availability and time commitment of mentors and mentees also helps coordinators to match duos based on the mentee's needs. Some newcomers require more assistance than others. As remarked by a coordinator, this should be considered, so you are not matching a mentee with extensive needs with a mentor who only has two hours to spare each month. Doing so will most likely lead (and often has) to frustrations on both sides. As a solution, some coordinators choose to match newcomers who require significant support with retirees or people with part-time jobs who have more time to spare than most other mentors.

Preferences: age, gender, and family

Research has found that perceived input into the matching process increases the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship (Allen et al., 2006). One way in which social mentoring programs for newcomers involve candidates in the matching process is by asking their preferences prior to matching. Coordinators repeatedly stressed the importance of taking such preferences into account:

If people mention that [a preference] explicitly, I want to take that into account. That often goes along with: how safe do you feel? How comfortable do you feel? I don't think you should ignore such signals.

The most common preference 'categories' relate to age, gender, and family structure. It should be noted that programs did not necessarily consider such factors decisive for a good match and were unable to conclude anything meaningful about the impact of mentor-mentee similarity vs. difference on the outcomes of mentoring. However, all coordinators agreed with the statement above and emphasised the importance of at least considering candidates' preferences.

In some programs, such preferences could even be decisive and take priority during the matching process. Preferences in terms of gender were considered especially important though programs' ability to respect such preferences depends in large part on their available pool of mentors and mentees, as explained by one coordinator:

It also often depends on the available mentors you have. Some really ask: 'I want such and such a person' but often that is not possible if you only have certain mentors at a given time. Let's say someone asks specifically for a man and you have 10 female mentors, well, you have to look for a solution in that and try to match as well as possible.

A criterion which has hardly been discussed in previous research, but which was repeatedly mentioned by social mentoring programs for newcomers is candidates' family structure. Due to the informal, leisure focus of social mentoring, mentors and mentees are often involved in each other's personal lives so that mentoring comes to include not just the duo but family members on either or both sides. Some social mentoring programs for newcomers even include the option to match with a family rather than an individual in their intake and most receive regular requests from and for families from both candidate mentors and mentees. A coordinator explains their approach and reasoning as follows:

I always ask, 'do you prefer someone individually or a family, and if so, a family with children or not?' Because, often, when mentors do choose that, they also become a mentor to the family. Often, those are younger families who also have young children and who find it very important that their children come into contact with diversity. And usually, a match with a family with young children is a really good match because they can go to the playground together, which is a lot easier and more accessible together.

While the playground is just one example, coordinators argue that matching mentors and mentees with children of a similar age also benefits the integration of newcomer children and allows mentors to share their knowledge on schools, child- and family services, homework, and other information relevant to recently arrived immigrant parents.

Personality

While research has shown that personality similarities between mentors and mentees improve the (perceived) quality of the mentoring relationship (Eby et al, 2013; Menges, 2016), coordinators of social mentoring programs for newcomers seem conflicted about its use as a matching criterion. Some do not consider it at all while those that do, do so based on their own intuition rather than through a standardized and systematic manner such as a personality test. A coordinator explains her approach as follows:

Once you've seen them at the intake, you have some idea of what kind of person they are. Are they a more private or more open person? So often during the intake you can say 'ok I am already thinking of someone I would like to match with you'.

When personality is included as a matching criterion, it is usually as traits of extraversion and introversion. Coordinators then usually match quiet, introverted people with more open, extroverted people based on the assumption that this will help avoid a lack of communication and initiative.

Limitations of matching criteria: mutual chemistry and coordinator intuition

While the right matching criteria can improve mentoring relationships and outcomes, there will always be some mystery in human connection. Previous research has emphasised the importance of mutual chemistry as a basis for a successful mentoring relationship (Rhodes, 2002), and many coordinators stress that it is sometimes impossible to know why one match works, and another fails.

In addition to their program's matching criteria, coordinators often rely on what they call their 'gut feeling' or 'intuition.' They all either explicitly mentioned these terms or said they sometimes simply 'felt' or 'knew' that two candidates would make a good match.

it's also a bit of a gut feeling when it comes to matching. On the one hand, we look at mutual expectations and interests and on the basis of that we try to match but on the other hand it is also a gut feeling.

At times, coordinators would meet a candidate during their intake and immediately know who they would want to match them with, without properly considering their program's matching criteria. While this 'gut feeling' may still be informed by their professional experience and the many successful and unsuccessful matches they have made in the past, there is – and most likely will always be – something intangible that both explains a connection between a mentor and mentee and a coordinator's ability to successfully predict that connection.

Discussion and Conclusion

In recent years, social mentoring for newcomers has gained in popularity in many migrant-receiving countries, particularly in the EU. While the practice of social mentoring for newcomers has become increasingly institutionalised, research on the topic is still lacking. To bring some clarity to the practice of social mentoring for newcomers, this paper provides a first insight into a crucial aspect of the mentoring process; matching. We set out to explore the perspective of organisations that offer social mentoring for newcomers and identify which matching criteria are most common in such programs. The findings show that program coordinators use a variety of matching criteria, which we have divided into three categories: mentee-specific criteria (mentee's needs and goals), mentor-specific criteria (mentor's knowledge, skills, and professional background), and general criteria (expectations, interests and hobbies, language skills, practical considerations, preferences in terms of age, gender and family structure, and personality).

While these criteria are used and considered important by practitioners, their actual use and applicability depend in large part on programs' objectives and their available pool of candidates. The relatively small size of many social mentoring programs necessitates a prioritisation of criteria. Social mentoring practitioners assigned various levels of importance to each criterion and while there was no definitive consensus on the prioritisation and ranking of criteria, practitioners did agree that program and participant objectives can help determine the relevance of other criteria on a case-by-case basis.

Our results are, to an extent, supported by the literature but also provide new insights. In practice, coordinators do not assign much importance to sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity except when a candidate expresses a strong age or gender preference. While race and ethnicity have been covered extensively in the literature (Blake-Beard et al., 2011; Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Eby et al., 2013; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Lankau et al., 2005), practitioners in social mentoring programs refrain from using such criteria. This decision is based on both ideological and practical considerations. While most practitioners do not consider sociodemographic characteristics relevant to successful social mentoring, practical constraints such as small candidate pools also prevent their systematic use as matching criteria.

Previous research has found that allowing some input from participants in the matching process can have significant positive effects on (perceptions of) the mentoring relationship and program (Allen et al., 2006; Blake-Beard et al., 2007). One way in which social mentoring programs for newcomers create opportunities for input from mentors and mentees is by incorporating their preferences in the matching decision. In addition to the previously mentioned preferences for age and gender, social mentoring for newcomers also adopts a preference category that has, so far, not been covered in the literature. Family structure is a particularly relevant criterion in social mentoring as the informal nature of the mentoring relationship and the focus on leisure activities create opportunities to involve family members of mentors and mentees.

While deep-level characteristics such as personality, values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests have been shown to have a positive influence on (perceptions of) the mentoring relationship and program (Eby et al., 2013; Madia & Lutz, 2004; Menges, 2016; Neuwirth & Wahl, 2017), social mentoring programs do not systematically use these as matching criteria, except for interests and, at times, personality. Interests are particularly relevant for social mentoring due to the more informal relationship and focus on leisure activities, especially when compared to traditional forms of mentoring that take place in more professional settings such as work and school. Even though we have included personality as a matching criterion, the manner in which social mentoring coordinators comprehend and apply this criterion is rudimentary compared to the more systematic, multidimensional understanding and application of personality and other deep-level characteristics as it has been covered in previous research.

Our findings on common matching criteria in social mentoring for newcomers furthermore show that practitioners take practical considerations such as geographical location and time availability into consideration as matching criteria. These criteria have also been shown to have positive outcomes for mentoring in previous research (Cox, 2005; Eby et al., 2013; Eby & Lockwood, 2005). A criterion which is somewhat unique to mentoring for newcomers is language skills. Compared to other types of mentoring, mentoring for newcomers usually brings together two or more people who do not necessarily speak the same language. This creates distinctive challenges and a need to consider the language skills of mentors and mentees during the matching process.

While “there will always be some degree of mystery in determining what makes two people click” (Rhodes, 2002, p. 104), using the right matching criteria can reduce the likelihood of a mismatch. In this paper, we have attempted to provide an overview of common matching criteria in social mentoring programs for newcomers. The findings provide important insights for policy and practice and offer a starting point for further empirical research into the matching of volunteers and newcomers.

Future research should expand on our findings by, for instance, assessing the effectiveness of the matching criteria on the quality of the mentoring relationship itself and outcomes of social mentoring for newcomers. Taking into consideration the overarching objective of social mentoring for newcomers – to support the social participation and integration of newcomers – further research should seek to determine the effect of matching criteria on various outcomes related to integration such as mentees’ sense of belonging, social network, and language skills. In our research, we have mostly focused on the perspectives of program coordinators and staff, thus offering avenues for further research to delve deeper into the perspectives of mentors and mentees and their perceptions on the matching process and mentoring relationship. Overall, we hope that our work presented here can offer a solid starting point for more empirical research on the ever more favoured social integration approach that is social mentoring for newcomers.

Endnotes

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