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Beyond the romance: the promise and pitfalls of refugee mentoring programs



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August 2017

Context

- Concerns about refugee integration and social cohesion (Cantle, 2012)
- Evidence of ambivalence towards asylum seekers (Essential Poll, 2016) and people of Muslim faith (Markus, 2016)
- First class settlement services but a gap in contact between refugees and local communities (Fodzar & Hartley, 2013, Westoby, 2009)

What is refugee mentoring?

Relationship

“..enables inter-cultural relationships that are otherwise unlikely to develop or progress in such intricate ways” (Askins, 2016, p. 525)

Refugees linked with trained volunteer members of local community to:

- assist settlement and integration
- enable cross-cultural learning
- develop reciprocal relationships (Askins, 2014; Esterhuizen & Murphy, 2007).

70 links per year requires one to two staff

My Research Question

How might the receiving community and refugees form relationships through refugee mentoring to welcome and assist integration of refugees?

My approach

Study of refugee mentoring programs in Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane:

- investigates how refugee mentoring assists or hinders relationships
- explores concepts of hospitality, intercultural encounter, reciprocity and gratitude
- ethnography, observation, interviews with mentors and refugee mentees, mentor survey & interviews with 4 program co-ordinators
- everyday multiculturalism approach privileges experiences of ordinary people (Wise & Velayuthum, 2009, Neal and Vincent, 2013)

Legacy of Aylan Kurdi

Sydney Vigil 2015



Everyday learning

Food: Cheese or butter?

Using a stove

Time

Catching trains and buses

Using a lift or escalator

Manners

Australian English

Shaking hands

Dealing with professionals

Junk mail and real mail

Dress

Classroom participation

Gender relations

Dating

Eye contact

Renting

Garbage

Cleanliness

Can you find us a cow?



Everyday challenges

Jamal

We don't know which one is sugar, which one is flour and you know which one is milk.

Asha

Before I get to know the number of the bus I used to cry and people come and help me and they were very extremely kind to me. Sometime I forget....I'm illiterate, completely illiterate.

Cracks

....sometimes when she was arranging a time to visit us, we didn't exactly realise what the time was, so she came and we were not home and she got really upset. We couldn't sometimes get what she was saying in terms of setting appointments. When that happened, she never called us back again (mentee)

This person is so busy, so why would they put their hand up for a mentoring program if they don't have sufficient time? (mentee)

I don't know the name of my mentor (mentee)

It's not all unicorns and rainbows (mentor)

Reciprocity and power relations

What are the underpinning values?

- Boundaries
- Rules e.g. mentee not allowed to visit mentor home or have mobile number
- Mentor reporting on visits
- Co-ordinator or mentor choosing the mentee
- Enabling voice of refugee in program

Hospitality



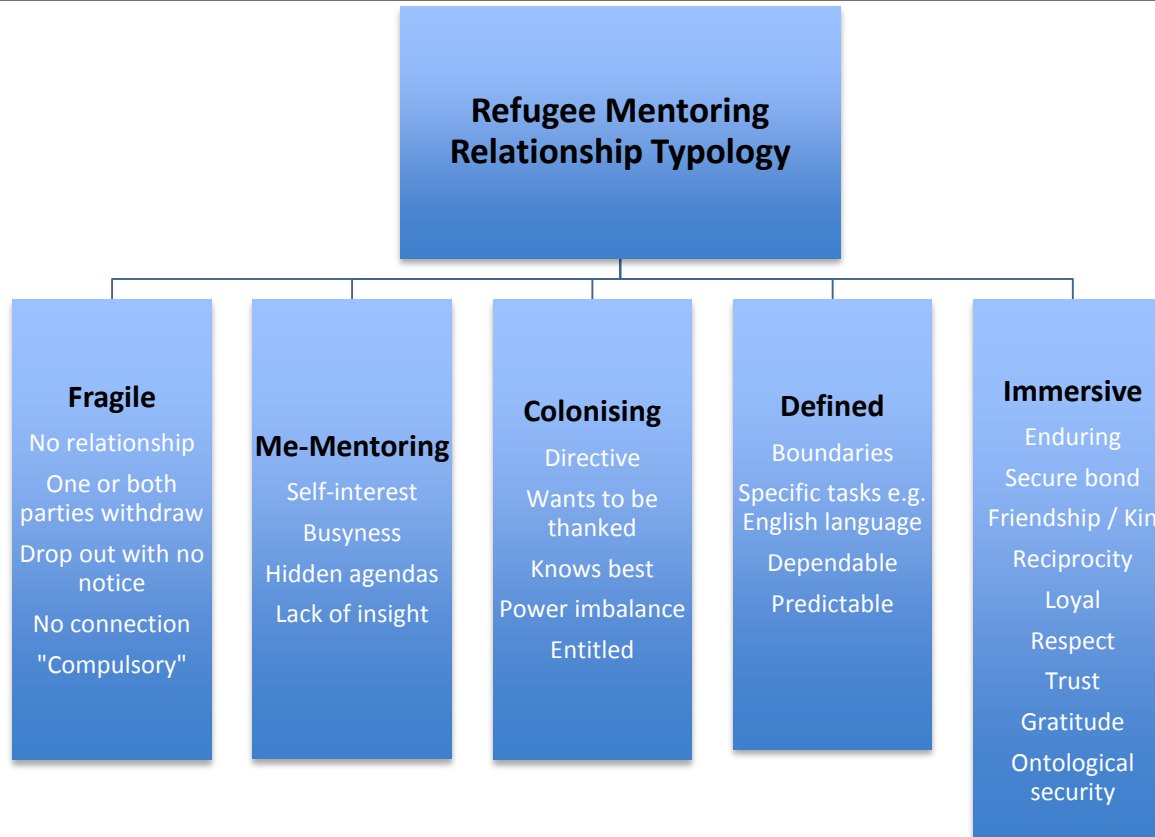
Benefits of having a mentor

- When the bond is strong, relationship can be transformative
- Someone to “count on”
- Mentor as role model and possibility of future self
- “Emotional citizenry” (Askins, 2017) and sense of belonging

Benefits of being a mentor

- Giving back
- Inter-cultural awareness
- Friendship
- Work experience
- Political action: mentoring as a “small act of defiance” (Bellemore, 2017)

Refugee Mentoring Relationship Typology (Bellemore, 2017)



Seven take home messages

1. Enable mentee voice
2. Don't over-manage risk
3. Expect misunderstanding
4. Evaluate
5. Screen and train
6. Six-month commitment and local match
7. Establish reference group and debriefs

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