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Inclusive Settlement of Young Asylum Seekers in a Rural Region: The Role of Informal Support and Mentoring

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Abstract: In the last ten years, the settlement and integration of refugee families and asylum seekers have represented some of the main challenges faced by European territories. People in need of international protection can face challenges in being settled and integrated into rural areas where it is often difficult to find co-ethnic support networks. This case study provides relevant data on how the settlement of young asylum seekers is carried out in the main town of a rural area in Catalunya. It explores the impact of a mentoring programme which consists of providing informal support to newcomers in language acquisition (Catalan), as well as inclusion in the job market and social capital. We interviewed almost all participants of that programme in this rural area, gathering in-depth interviews with mentees (with eight young asylum seekers) and two discussion groups with their mentors (living in the main town of the region). Our findings showed that whereas the main objectives of the programme are providing linguistic support, social capital and inclusion to the job market, mentoring is more focused on providing emotional support and cultivating a sense of belonging. Various outcomes will be discussed which consider the types of support that were present in mentoring relationships and how bonding and bridging social capital were fostered, namely the elements that can promote a more inclusive and welcoming rural community.

Keywords: rural community; asylum seekers; settlement; social capital; social support; mentoring



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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of asylum seekers in various European countries, as well as in other parts of the world [1]. In fact, in the last decade, there have been 16.2 million asylum applications worldwide. This is primarily due to the outbreak of wars and internal conflicts in Middle Eastern countries and the departure of Venezuelans to other American countries, amongst many other reasons [2]. This situation has led supra-state, state, regional and local governments to look for new measures to meet the challenges posed by these migratory flows. The multilevel governance of migration [3] is also suitable in the asylum seekers' process of integration, and it also generates new actors from within civil society who engage in and complement the role of public authorities in this matter.

The European Union has urged its member states to develop innovative solutions in rural environments. This is due to the positive effects that several initiatives have had in various countries, leading to the rehabilitation of rural areas, more investment in services and connections with urban areas, the improvement of infrastructures and the development of environmentally or territorially sustainable projects [4]. In other countries (such as Australia or Canada), governments and civil society have developed different

strategies to transform rural areas into safe spaces for the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers [5,6].

Asylum-seekers are individuals who are seeking international protection, specifically someone who despite having submitted a claim of asylum, he or she has not been yet recognised as a refugee. By contrast, a refugee is someone who has been recognised as a person who requires international protection, because his or her situation was evaluated and meets the criteria for being recognised with this status [7].

In legal terms, there is a considerable difference when it comes to residence and work permits. In Spain, people who access the state reception programme (because they are asylum seekers) go through three different phases (of 6 months each) managed by non-profit organisations [8]. Firstly, they enter a phase called “temporary reception”, in which they can access vocational training courses and have access to accommodation and financial support. At this stage, they do not have a work permit, but they do have a residence permit. Secondly, they enter the phase called “integration”, in which they must find a place to live. This stage is characterised as such because they have a work permit for the first time, however, if they get a job they stop receiving financial support. Finally, the third phase (autonomy), in which despite continuing to enjoy the residence and work permits, they lack financial support and only have the assistance of non-profit organisations in terms of finding training courses and work. It is necessary to mention that the Spanish state establishes a limit of 6 months to respond to requests for international protection, but in reality, the response to the request may take one or even two years [9]. If international protection is denied, they lose their residence and work permits, thus becoming irregular migrants, unless the organisations that support them find an alternative way to renew their permits [8]. Those to whom international protection is recognised, which in Spain in 2020 were only 5% of the total applications (In the same year, 60% of total applicants (114.919) became irregular because their applications were denied. The remainder, 35% of applicants, had a negative resolution, but received a temporal residence permit owing to humanitarian reasons) [10], can continue with the extension of both their residence and work permits.

In Spain, from 2015 onwards, the centralised structure of the state asylum system has been complemented by regional and local administrations initiatives which cover existing shortcomings, as well as a greater presence of social organisations in the management of the asylum process [9]. As a result of this greater decentralisation, the Catalan Government, with the collaboration of various social entities with refugee expertise, promoted the Catalan Refugee Programme (CRP) in 2017. This initiative, in addition to facilitating the access of people seeking international protection to housing resources and benefits, provides a mentoring programme through groups of civil society volunteers, who meet weekly with an asylum seeker or refugee person (or family) for a period of 8 months (extendable to 1 year) and who assist them in achieving full social and labour autonomy [11]. Since 2017, more than five hundred asylum seekers or refugee people and almost one thousand mentors have participated in the mentoring programme [12].

The aim of this article is to analyse what challenges young adult asylum seekers face in their settlement in a rural area in Catalonia and how this mentoring programme can help to alleviate the difficulties they are facing in their host society. The article aims to provide the international community with evidence that could encourage the emergence of similar social integration strategies in other territories and where it could thus be replicated. In this sense, asylum seekers positively valued having been relocated to a rural area, as they expressed positive feelings for the social proximity and tranquillity that exists in such environments, despite mentioning several challenges. The presence of mentors providing social support to alleviate the various existing obstacles is highlighted.

2. Literature Review

This section is based on asylum seekers and research studies concerning refugee integration. We considered both groups since, even though there are substantial differences between the statuses (the durability of residence and work permits, the support received

from social entities, etc.), both are forcibly displaced people that have commonalities in terms of the challenges they face during their settlement in a new community. Concretely, we refer to them getting their basic needs covered, environmental difficulties (related to culture and language), and the impact of displacement and settlement factors on their wellbeing [13]. Furthermore, the mentoring programme does not differentiate between groups in order to restrict access. In fact, considering the waiting times that exist to receive a resolution on international protection in Spain, it is very likely that part of the mentees who access as asylum seekers will receive a response regarding their refugee status while they are participating in mentoring. Therefore, a person can access the programme as an asylum seeker and end their participation by being recognised as a refugee.

Existing studies that have focused on the comparison between refugees or asylum seekers and the host population have been essential for advancing and understanding the integration process. This is especially true for those who settled in rural areas [14,15]. Asylum seekers and their host societies have a different past: the differences therein may pre-determine their personal and social resources, perception of environmental stressors, coping styles and thus affect the emotional elements of well-being [16]. There are numerous studies identifying community, family, and friends as important factors of social support of refugees in the host country. Government programs are designed to provide refugee youth and families support in their integration [17]. Prior to developing orientation programs for refugee youths, it is important to identify what young asylum seekers need in order to support their resettlement.

In the literature review, one of the main focuses is on two key psychosocial needs: developing a sense of wellbeing, including belonging; and, the ability to adapt to their new environment (e.g., pursuit of higher education, using public transportation, understanding social-cultural etiquettes, finding a job). Psychosocial needs were broadly defined as including social, security, cultural, and educational needs [17]. The rising number of asylum seekers in the world has attracted the attention of policymakers to the wellbeing of these newcomers. Wellbeing is accepted as a subjective evaluation of the psychological and emotional situation of the subject, but it also has an objective dimension that is determined by the material conditions in which they live. This multi-dimensionality pushed us to question both the subjective evaluations and objective conditions of the asylum seekers. The well-being of an individual is dependent upon several factors operating at different levels. Psychological individual resources, social ecology and culture/values are listed as three core domains of the wellbeing of refugees [18]. Psychological resources are individuals' coping strategies, whereas social ecology refers to the support received by the asylum seekers from their families and communities. The compatibility of the culture and values with the host community also contributes to the wellbeing of them. Most importantly, the relationship between the asylum seekers and the community has a direct effect on their well-being.

The second group of effects that impact the settlement of asylum seekers in different ways (via the mentoring relationship) is social capital. There are a number of definitions for social capital, however, they all have in common that the term refers to "social networks, the norms of reciprocity that arises from them, and the value of this to achieve (mutual) goals" [19]. Some authors define it within the context of individualism, whilst others define it as a group or community milieu [20] asserting that social capital is not an individual feature, but rather is "a group-level phenomenon". They have posited that individuals cannot create social capital by themselves since it is more than the summing of individuals' social capital. Social capital involves mutual trust, reciprocity, groups, collective identity, working together, and a sense of shared future. Putnam [21] defined social capital as "features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit".

There are two fundamental aspects of social capital: bonding and bridging. According to Emery, Fey and Flora [22], bonding social capital refers to close and repeated ties which operate to develop a community. Flora and Flora [20] indicated that these ties may be

emotionally charged and based on class, ethnicity, and gender, or like characteristics. Members of a group with high bonding capital tend to be familiar with one another through different community settings or roles. Emery et al. [22] indicated that bridging social capital involves ample ties that link organisations and communities together. This enables community groups to connect with one another in addition to outside groups. Bridging social capital brings people together for singular purposes. When bridging and bonding social capital are high, communities are prepared for action and hence outcomes can be realised [20]. Simpson [23] stated that those who enjoy a high level of social capital are usually those who feel a strong sense of belonging, a willingness to participate in community activities, and a commitment to work toward the future well-being of the community. In these communities, social inclusion and participation by diverse community members are valued, and increased potential opportunities are an outcome of interaction and participation in networks rather than merely functioning as a process.

In addition to the many difficulties of being an asylum seeker, youths also encounter additional challenges in their new homes. As the transition into early adulthood is already dominated by physical, mental and emotional development [24], it makes the integration process inherently more complex and problematic. Many of them do not possess sufficient language skills, as they have no opportunity to learn the language of the host country before leaving their own country. The language skills possessed by youths have important consequences beyond academic success/failure: it also affects their employability in the labour market and the establishment of healthy communication with others within their environment. This incompatibility may lead to discrimination by the host community in the social domain [25,26].

The process of discrimination and prejudice is a base component of Allport's contact theory which has analysed the effect of direct contact and mass-mediated contact on attitudes towards refugees. The role of intergroup contact can be modified by contact with individuals from other (ethnic) groups under certain conditions [27]. This hypothesis, also known as the intergroup contact theory, was proposed by Allport [28] and it has emerged as "a widely used framework in the study of intergroup relations and intergroup prejudice" [29]. It postulates that intergroup contact reduces prejudice between members of traditionally opposed racial groups [30,31]. Consequently, individuals who have (direct) contact with immigrants or refugees (which is the case in current study), should have more positive attitudes towards them than individuals who lack contact with these groups [32].

On the other hand, there are also many difficulties in being a migrant in rural areas. The forms, frequency and types of contact can be a key prerequisite that contributes to the integration of immigrants to the host community. This occurs by fostering positive intergroup relations and the reduction of negative stereotypes and prejudice [28,33]. According to Hynie, the contact between asylum seekers (refugees) and host communities has a very unique function in the rural areas. Many different studies showed that the quality of the contact is more important than its quantity. Feelings of intimacy and equality between group members, having common goals and motivation to cooperate as well as institutional norms, are listed as the preconditions of a qualified contact which expected to have a positive impact [33]. Some scholars have highlighted the importance of the context of the settlement of asylum seekers [34]. Weidinger and Kordel [35] note the recent tendency of the increasing number of asylum seekers distributed in rural areas and have highlighted two main reasons for this. Firstly, a wide distribution of asylum seekers not only to big cities but also to rural areas, and secondly, the need to redistribute the cost of integration through different tiers of government. Proietti and Veneri [1] claim that the percentage of asylum seekers in rural areas has increased since 2011 in many European countries.

The resettlement of asylum seekers or refugees to rural areas has both advantages and disadvantages. Firstly, since the number of residents of rural areas is relatively small, newcomers may have more opportunities to make contact with locals and it may create a positive environment for social cohesion. Hence, it is known that many countries prefer the resettlement of immigrants into small communities. Moreover, the settlement of asylum

seekers is often perceived to reduce demographic and economic decline, as well as functioning as a way to increase the funding from the central to local governments [36]. However, some studies show that refugee settlements in rural areas have created an adverse effect: resettled refugees have sometimes failed to develop social networks, faced discrimination and become isolated, mostly as a result of the lack of a co-ethnic community [33]. For instance, “the location of social housing in rural areas, when leave to remain is granted, may further instill feelings of isolation. Additionally, the lack of receptiveness of local people may exacerbate feelings of exclusion, which can lead to further deterioration of asylum seekers’ mental health” [37]. Others claim that in rural areas, refugee inflows tend to increase support for anti-immigrant policies [38]. On the other hand, metropolitan centres seem to be more advantageous for the resettlement of migrants as their multi-ethnic composition may facilitate the process of integration [39].

3. Materials and Methods

This article is a case study that seeks to analyse the integration of asylum seekers who were involved in the CRP in rural areas. It is primarily based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with eight asylum seekers and ten volunteers. As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this program, which is implemented by the Catalan government with the collaboration of local authorities and social movements, is to facilitate the settlement of asylum seekers with the collaboration of a mentoring program.

The study was carried out in a small rural area in the province of Girona. This region has hosted economic immigration over the last 20 years, and has a long tradition of implementing immigrant integration policies. It is difficult to know how many asylum seekers there are in this area because the Spanish Home Department publishes the data by provinces or autonomous communities, but not by municipalities. We know that in the entire Girona province in 2019, 756 applications for international protection were made, which means 0.6% of the total applications for that year. Therefore, this region has a small share of asylum seekers’ demands in comparison with other Spanish regions. For example, in the same year, the provinces wherein there were the most applications were: Madrid (47%); Barcelona (10%); and Valencia (4.7%). Each of these three territories has very dense urban areas [40].

This area was chosen because it was the rural territory where there were more mentoring relationships. The interviews and discussion groups were conducted at the facilities of the social entity which supports asylum seekers since it is a space known to mentors and mentees. There were no major problems when it came to the language because they were made in Spanish or Catalan according to the knowledge of each person. They were mostly done in Catalan with the mentors and in Spanish with the mentees. The approximate duration of the interviews was one hour and one and a half or two hours in the case of focus groups.

We conducted the interviews and focus groups whilst maintaining the confidentiality of the data and the anonymization of the results. The anonymization was carefully performed with the aim of keeping the balance of showing as much information as possible but, at the same time, anonymizing the personal stories, data and context. This was done in order to avoid the identification of participants, especially the most vulnerable, and who have been victims of war and/or social and political persecution. In this sense, the data of the fieldwork where this information appears is kept in a single computer and in a repository of secure files on the servers of the University of Girona following the indications contained in the guide of ethical recommendations of the European Commission regarding the research with refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. The Ethics and Biosafety Committee of the University of Girona approved the research protocols and deontological criteria to be followed vis-à-vis informed consent.

During the selection process of the people to be interviewed, priority was given to people who had recently closed the relationship, as their memories and lived experiences are still fresh and thus less susceptible to misrepresentation (i.e., what neuroscience refers

to as “the phone game”) [41]. On the other hand, groups that were at an advanced stage of the relationship and were still formally participating in the CRP mentoring programme were also selected. Finally, those participants who had been meeting for a few weeks were discarded because the information they could provide was limited and the impacts of the programme could have little visibility. In total, information was collected from five mentoring relationships which are still active and three which have recently closed.

Regarding the mentees, a total of eight asylum seekers participating in five mentoring relationships in the programme were interviewed. Each of these participants was from the middle city and a nearby town. Most of them live as a couple, some with their children and some with their parents remaining in their home country. They had been living in the area for more than a year when they were interviewed, but no more than five. None of them chose to live in the municipality where they resided, rather they were resettled to the area after having lived in big cities for a few months. All of them have a similar administrative status: they are asylum seekers (they have the “red card”, a personal identity document of asylum seekers in Spain) and have similar ages (between their early twenties and early thirties). However, the educational, socioeconomic and countries origin are diverse. Many spoke Spanish as their mother tongue (those that came from Latin American countries) whilst the others were from Ukraine and had little knowledge of Spanish and Catalan.

The mentors participated in two focus groups and a semi-open interview representing a total of ten volunteers who integrated six mentoring relationships. In terms of gender composition, the focus groups also reflect the majority presence of women amongst the program’s volunteers. Nine out of ten were women. In the case of mentors, the age profile varies considerably from the age of twenty to seventy, including young people involved in the associative movement all the way to retired people. All were aware of the existing social inequalities and the need to engage actively in the reception of immigrants and, more specifically, of asylum seekers and refugees.

Once the interviews and discussion groups were conducted, the audio and audio-visual files that were collected were transcribed and manually coded and anonymized for further analysis. All but one of the interviews and groups could be recorded with a mentored person at their request. In this case, notes were taken, and the content was quickly transcribed to maintain, as far as possible, the literalness of his words.

We coded the materials using ATLASTi following a flexible coding strategy [42], paying attention inductively to the information provided. Categories were created taking into consideration what mentees and mentors said during interviews and focus groups. These categories were: Initial mentoring expectations; Future mentoring perspectives; Emotional wellbeing; Catalan language; Social capital; Labour sphere; and, Impact on mentors’ environment.

The quotations included in the Results section were anonymised with common Spanish names in order to protect the identity of mentees and mentors. Female and male Spanish names were used for differentiating interviewees by sex.

4. Results

4.1. *Prior Perceptions of Mentees and Mentors of the Mentoring Programm*

This section presents the results in relation to the previous perceptions of mentors and mentees regarding the mentoring process. This analysis is relevant since it allows us to identify the challenges asylum seekers faced, as well as identifying similarities and differences in expectations between mentors and mentees. Previous perceptions have allowed us to identify interests, priorities of mentoring relationships and previous perceptions regarding otherness: this has allowed us to better understand mentoring relationships and therefore the impact of the programme on the rural community as a whole.

In the case of the mentees, their interest in the relationship with the volunteers was related to the facilities they could obtain for their integration within the new environment. Concretely, they highlighted the possibility of improving the use of the language, getting

to know the socio-cultural environment in which they are immersed better, and expanding their social network.

It was a programme that (. . .) where we could meet people who (. . .) the environment (. . .), people who live here and who master the language, know the customs and traditions, have a network of friends (Felipe, mentee).

However, some mentees expressed some distrust at first about volunteer participation. One of the participants even explained that he did not understand why there were people in the country of settlement who wanted to help him voluntarily. Finally, these uncertainties and doubts disappeared once they got to know each other, and some trust was generated with the mentors when the potential of the relationship was perceived.

Here, and everywhere, there are good people and bad people, but one cannot be with that anxiety or that fear that they are going to hurt you. I thought so. So, I didn't want to know anything, why I said (. . .) and well, it is essential to know people like that because they help you to integrate into society, both socially and professionally, as well as in traditional matters, to know all this. And we were very interested. We were interested in being aware of everything, practicing the language a bit with them too . . . (Antonia, mentee).

Furthermore, they commented that, at the beginning of their relationship, they assumed that it would be a very institutionalised and formal one, a perspective that changed over time and once the relationship was guaranteed. This confirms that formal mentoring relationships, despite being produced through the intermediation of a community social intervention program, can become similar to a natural mentoring relationship, namely those that occur in a usual way with people from one's own environment (i.e., friends, family, teachers . . .). Different authors have pointed out that formal mentoring relationships must resemble natural relationships to be truly effective, something that mostly occurred in the mentoring relationships that are considered in this study [43,44].

At first, I thought it was very formal. In other words, that it could be something more institutional, a few hours . . . And no, no, totally flexible everything . . . Firstly they tell you that it is something you can give up when you want. You do not feel obligated. I do not feel compelled to meet with them, (if) it arises, we always have time (Ana, mentee).

Regarding the expectations of the mentors, most of them had some concerns and expectations before becoming part of the program. Logically, these perceptions are conditioned by the profile of the mentors, who already stood out for having an important sensitivity in issues related to migration, cultural diversity, North–South relations, etc. Likewise, most of these people defined themselves as politicised, not because of their membership in political parties or for having a position at the institutional level, but because of their engagement in social and cultural organisations. Amongst the main motivations that encouraged them to participate in the programme are a desire to help other people, as well as to be able to take practical action. Beyond having empathetic and supportive attitudes towards the situation of refugees and asylum seekers, what motivated the volunteers most was the possibility of being able to take concrete actions that would serve to improve their situation. Other more personal interests were also mentioned, such as being able to know first-hand the situation of the international conflicts that led to the flight of asylum seekers, such as the conflict in Syria, as well as others.

Take some time to see what's going on, to see why people are moving. I was also partly selfish about it, about being sociologically interested in what's going on with these people who are moving . . . right? Different situations. All of us (referring to the teammates in the volunteer group) we were more or less looking for the same (Natalia, mentor).

In some cases, volunteers explicitly emphasised that their initial expectations did not revolve around making close friendships with mentees. In this sense, the chances of establishing an emotional bond with them were rather low.

It was not my expectation. If it took up perfect, but I was not going to make friends. I knew my job was another (Inés, mentor).

In addition to the motivations and expectations, volunteers had doubts about how the mentoring programme would be developed. Some of these questions were due to a certain lack of information regarding the program, and others were with how the mentoring activity would be concretised. Most mentors believed that their participation was related to the following activities: knowledge and discovering of the new environment; attendance at social and cultural activities in the new municipality; and, having meals and exchanging or hanging out with other people, etc. Given this, most of the previous ideas were oriented towards activities that promote knowledge and familiarisation with the host city, as well as fostering meetings, participation and interaction with other people, specifically through various social and cultural activities.

Moreover, some mentors had previous concerns about their role towards mentees. In general terms, they were aware that their role was to accompany and provide support, and those paternalistic attitudes should be avoided since these greatly hinder one of the implicit objectives of the program, namely the promotion of autonomy of mentees.

4.2. Impact of Mentoring on Mentees

Mentoring relationships impacted the settlement and integration of asylum seekers in different ways. However, they all have in common the ability that mentoring had in providing greater psychological and emotional well-being, due to feeling more supported by the presence of people in their lives who are fully available to them. Additionally, we look at the implications of this mentoring relationship in building a community with broader social capital that benefits both mentors and mentees.

Firstly, we highlight the ability of mentoring to provide companionship and social support to those people who were experiencing their rooting process alone. Lack of social support and separation from family members were aspects that, as different authors have highlighted [45], generate discomfort in the mental health of refugees and asylum seekers, mainly because of feelings of isolation and discriminatory or exclusionary experiences in the new environment. The young asylum seekers in this study highlight how the presence of mentors in their lives generated a sense of “family” or, at least, meant a safe space in which to share an activity that allowed them to put aside concerns related to the migratory process they were experiencing and thus reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

For example, in my case, alone in the sense that I do not have the family and feeling alone is something that we cannot avoid. Many familiar things are needed. But the foundation has supported us a lot, the mentors have given us their support in what they have been able to do, that is, we could say that we are not alone either. Feeling is one thing, but reality is another. With mentors yes, good, there are these hours of conversation, coffee and sharing. They make you busy and think less (Ana, mentee).

Furthermore, the accompaniment of mentors to asylum seekers was also perceived as useful because they could ask questions and receive advice, recommendations, and practical information. The mentees explained that this social support through advice could help them address the different obstacles that they encountered in the new environment. As such, they had more information on how to access the various existing services.

Recently we’ve turned to them a lot. It is not for solve our lives through them, but if in the case they know something, they can notice us. As a point of reference (Felipe, mentee).

It should be noted that one of the most significant impacts of mentoring relationships was the improvement of the emotional well-being of asylum seekers. Mentees reflected in the interviews how all this social support received had an impact on feeling more supported in aspects that affected them emotionally. In fact, the presence of forms of social support such as emotional support when they have felt alone (as we will see below) or advice and support, without perceiving it as an intrusion into their lives, suggests that in general these relationships were naturally, well established and close [43].

On the emotional side they have helped me a lot. When I felt more alone, they supported me (Sara, mentee).

In addition, we see how these mentoring relationships not only helped to strengthen ties within the rural community, but also led mentees to have more resources to access services, as well as feel they are more connected to the day-to-day life of the community, its traditions and the people who make it up. Therefore, mentors achieved the role of translators and guides in the new environment, with a special presence in the practice of the Catalan language in different relationships as a significant resource to better understand the functioning of the society in which asylum seekers are settled. The mentees expressed this as being relevant in accessing the labour market as well as public and/or private services.

Because at the beginning of the programme it was very, very good. It is good chance to practice language and they have been told many things from here like the festivities (local or national), the life here . . . (Manuel, mentee).

It is important for the job. To go to the doctor, to the supermarket, to the hairdresser. Language (Catalan) is very important here. The important fact for me is to understand it. Even if you cannot write it, understanding it is important (Sara, mentee).

These quotes, therefore, illustrate how these mentoring relationships fostered the creation of links between the host society and newcomers, which may have strong implications for the social capital of the rural community as a whole. In fact, we consider that the mentoring relationships helped in the construction of bonding social capital since both groups highlighted wanting to continue with this relationship after participating in the program. As we have been arguing, mentoring relationships had an emotional support function characteristic of close emotional relationships. In fact, mentors and mentees initially thought that the mentoring relationship was not going to generate close ties of friendship, but in the end, they reflected that a friendship had been achieved between them.

In the end, a very friendly relationship was developed. We do not feel that they are the mentors and that they are there to . . . no . . . It is very natural. They were two people we met, who gave us their support as far as they can . . . we know that we can ask them for help at certain (times) and we know that they are open to give it to us (. . .). We have never thought that they are people who are going to leave at a certain point . . . At first yes, (it was) to help us with the language, but . . . it exceeds the expectations (Ana, mentee).

With the passage of time mentors also saw the capacity that this relationship could have in terms of strengthening ties (and not only having a tangible utility) for the mentors. Some mentors highlighted this change in perspective, understanding that the relationship had changed over time and had been established in a more horizontal and natural way.

Our task has been to give a space in which people can be people, where they are contemplated from an equal perspective (Gina, mentor).

In the end, we have greatly exceeded the limits that we had set ourselves, but because it comes naturally to you and you feel calmer that way (Natalia, mentor).

Friendship relationships that are close and have emotional implications for people are often understood as bonding social capital [46]. In fact, we considered bonding social capital to be the main characteristic of mentoring relationships in terms of social capital. However, these types of close relationships can also have a bridging social capital function [46]. That is, it can provide access to information and to other groups or individuals not previously known to others [47]. These bridging relationships in which mentors act as bridging social agents were effective in accessing public service centres where they did not know, at the time, exactly how the system worked. As an example, one of the asylum seekers pointed out that on one occasion her mentors supported her by accompanying her to the health centre in order to assist her understanding of how it worked.

We didn't understand about the CAP (CAP stands for Community health center) and yes, one of the mentors accompanied us, because she is super close to us, and she knew how it worked (Carmen, mentee).

In the same vein, the bridging social capital was evident for providing substantial information for access to resources and also feeling more secure or protected against possible difficulties that could arise when reaching a public or private service. Additionally, thanks to the mentors' social network, the mentees could also benefit indirectly. This can

be identified in terms of a more material nature, but also in terms of connections with other people that were relevant to the mentees. For example, mentors used their networks of contacts to help asylum seekers when they moved into their own home since they knew that several people in the community leave their furniture and other household items in a warehouse.

There was an initiative based on a lack (of the reception system) to store and collect furniture and sheets . . . all that is necessary for the house because it is something that is not covered. The removal theme is not contemplated. Some people from our group went to look for furniture, beds . . . whatever they need. It is kept in a warehouse and all this work is done by volunteers (Irene, mentor).

They helped me find it because I had nothing. I was on the floor. They helped me find beds, tables, plates, chairs, furniture, blankets . . . well, everything from a house. They helped me. They helped me to go up to it. They brought a van and helped me (Antonia, mentee).

This more indirect benefit of mentoring relationships involving the mentor's social network could be seen in other relationships. For example, a mentee described that her mentors had helped her get clothes for her baby because the mentors' friends gave them baby clothes knowing that they could be of use to the mentee. In addition, as we had mentioned, bridging social capital could also be identified in terms of connecting the mentee with other people who could help him in a specific aspect. As an example, a mentee explained to us that on one occasion, a friend of the mentor was able to take her to a medical visit (in a city near the town). The lack of public transportation services meant that she needed someone to drive her. Mentors gave other examples of how their network of friends could help the mentees in their social inclusion. In this case, we give an example of some mentors who, thanks to a friend, were able to send a job offer to their mentee.

We also introduced her to a friend of ours, of whom we are very close friends and who could offer her a job . . . and he offered it to her (Maria, mentor).

In conclusion, we wish to highlight the ability of mentoring in helping to build these bridges between asylum seekers and the rural community. In turn, this helps to build a more cohesive society wherein asylum seekers feel more integrated and where they also are empowered with greater agency to overcome obstacles.

The simple fact of meeting them and that they are from here already meets our expectations of meeting people from here . . . (Mentors) are our only relationship with people in the environment, and those that they can present to us in the time of these meetings (Ana, mentee).

It is essential to meet people like this because they help you to integrate into society, both socially and professionally. (Felipe, mentee)

4.3. Impact of Mentoring on Mentors

The impacts of mentoring amongst mentors can be divided into the personal sphere and their immediate environment. At the personal level, the mentors positively value the experience since participation in the programme has allowed them to know first-hand the situation of asylum seekers. It is unlikely they would have had the opportunity to know this if they had not participated. This experience has enriched them personally, and in particular allowed them to work on values related to empathy, solidarity, respect and active listening.

Finding two worlds that would not have met otherwise, or that would have been much more difficult for us to have established a relationship without the program. And then the positive part of the fact that it's like that, that even though it's not as natural as a relationship you make, you also go slowly, trying to listen to the other . . . (Natalia, mentor).

The experience, let's say, enriches because you have the opportunity to meet different people, and see your reaction to that . . . (Roger, mentor).

They have also been able to learn about aspects related to other cultures. Cultural exchange, whether based on languages, history, traditions, gastronomy, music, or literature,

is one of the most important aspects. It not only serves to learn new things, but to question one's own cultural traditions, and fight against prejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentric attitudes [30,31].

Beyond the individual impact of participating in the mentoring program, it has also had an impact on family and friends. As mentioned, when talking about the profile of mentors, most have pointed out that their family and friendship circle is already made up mostly of people who are sensitive to the reality of asylum seekers and this complicates the detection of substantial changes in discriminatory or racist attitudes. However, the fact of having first-hand knowledge of the reality of asylum seekers, as well as having the opportunity to know the vicissitudes faced by asylum seekers when settling into the new society, have allowed them to be more aware of what the process of reception and integration involves. Interaction, face-to-face relationships, and first-person testimonies are considered key to contrasting information that often circulates in a vague way, and which presents asylum seekers and refugees as privileged people, or who receive a favourable treatment by the administrations. This is one of the most prominent elements for mentors: it shows that beyond the personal dimension, mentoring relationships allow the base to be broadened vis-à-vis attitudes and thus the defence of equality and non-discrimination in relation to origins.

When they say nonsense things about what they charge or that they (government) give help to outsiders but not to people from here. These things, when you know the whole bureaucratic issue . . . you can say "no because the red card . . ." (laughs) (Irene, mentor).

Well, at least those stupid things that people say about where the money comes from (for help them), or this theory that only outsiders are helped . . . this is something that is said here (anonymized), I think maybe that can have an effect (Cristina, mentor).

However, one of the issues that the mentors have also considered useful in their participation in the programme was the possibility of "standing in front of the mirror". In other words, to be aware of the privileged position that some people have in society, especially in the case of white, middle-class people who do not suffer the multiple discriminations that affect diverse minorities. Mentoring relationships involve becoming aware of the multiple situations of inequality that affect Western societies today, as well as questioning the origins of the unequal relations that affect the planet as a whole. This includes relations between countries from the North and the South.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study shed light on the integration of young asylum seekers in rural areas, focusing on how a social mentoring programme can impact upon overcoming obstacles and difficulties in this new environment. Some previous studies have shown that refugees or asylum seekers in rural areas can face episodes of discrimination, have difficulties in creating networks of support and encounter a lack of receptiveness by local people. In turn, this can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and loneliness [33,37]. However, this paper shows that a well-established mentoring programme can foster bonding between the host community and asylum seekers. This makes it easier to avoid the development of feelings of isolation and, therefore, build greater psychological well-being. A very important finding in this study is the fact that establishing contact with the asylum seekers would reduce negative attitudes, negative stereotypes and prejudice towards them. Intergroup contact can encourage the development of integrated, and less stigmatised, newcomer identities, and also foster positive intergroup relationships. The positive impact of intergroup interactions between asylum seekers and locals, as described above can become a prerequisite of social support. These can include feelings of intimacy and equality between the group members, having shared goals and cooperation to achieve them, and institutional norms which support positive intergroup relationships.

It was seen how mentors were present in the lives of mentees by delivering different types of social support. They were providers of instrumental support which complemented the support provided by social organisations. It is highlighted how the mentees were sup-

ported and accompanied to the accessing of public services, as they still did not accurately understand how they worked or, to supply the absence of services giving them support. Furthermore, the advice and information they received was helpful for mentees when they had doubts, due to a lack of knowledge of the environment, something which can have implications both in social life as well as in the labour market. Although something characteristic of relationships is that, in spite of there not being an initial approach of the programme about providing the mentees with emotional support and that mentors also did not expect to create a relationship of such closeness, the mentors were nonetheless a very significant source of emotional support. These expressions of support were more related to empathising, understanding and listening to the other. In conjunction with the other types of social support that were identified, these were the key to maintaining the young people's psychological and emotional well-being [43,48].

The mentees mentioned having the expectation of being able to improve the use of the language, better understanding the sociocultural environment in which they were settling and expanding their networks. These concerns had a special impact on this group of asylum seekers since they influence their settlement and integration. Moreover, they are also elements that can condition different significant events of their early adulthood, such as entering the labour market [49,50]. In the Catalan context, the knowledge of the Catalan language is highly important amongst the set of integration policies for immigrants promoted by the Catalan Government and is determinant for access to the job market, or to develop a fully independent life in the environment given that the population of Catalonian rural areas makes greater use of Catalan in their day-to-day life than the population of urban areas [51,52]. The development of language skills (or practicing Catalan more frequently thanks to mentors) has an effect in the work and personal sphere, also helping to reduce the risks of suffering episodes of discrimination in asylum seekers' social lives [25,26].

The knowledge of the host society was produced thanks to the desire of mentors to become translators and guides in the new environment. They explained the characteristics of the host society to asylum seekers and gave them resources to help them become autonomous. In this sense, it has been highlighted how mentors can exercise this role as institutional agents, facilitating access to certain resources that, in the absence of such a relationship, would not have been obtained [53,54]. The ability of the mentors to detect the necessary resources and transmit them (or to provide important information to the refugees) was perceived by the mentees as a great source of support. The practice of the local language, Catalan, knowing how decisive it is to understand the functioning of the environment is an example, but we also saw it when the mentees asked for information and advice, since the mentors were "a point of reference", as one of the mentees said.

Mentees perceived the mentoring relationship as a great advance vis-à-vis integrating into some social circle that would allow them to have greater access to resources. This is observed in the ability of the mentors to move resources and make them available to the mentees, for example, when they were looking for a flat and had difficulties with transfers and furniture. The mentors mobilised their own resources to fill this gap that they saw in institutional support. They organised themselves to have a warehouse to collect what other people in the community were no longer using and they also organised support of the transfers. Therefore, we see how the mentoring served to channel a series of resources that were present in the social capital of the host community, and that without the bonding with asylum seekers, this bridging social capital would unlikely have occurred.

Furthermore, it was observed how these relationships, which were initially perceived as something that could be highly institutionalised (and which generated distrust in the mentees due to previous discriminatory experiences), finally became very close relationships. Therefore, mentoring can promote the existing bonds of social capital in a community, since the ties between these young asylum seekers and the established people of the area were strengthened, which in turn facilitated the establishment of bridges that allowed the transmission of significant resources [22]. Considered together, all this suggests that mentoring has the ability to make two groups that coexist (and with low bridging and

social capital bonding between them) nonetheless get to know each other and cooperate for the future of the community. In the process, they will expand their social capital thanks to the mutual trust established and being able to work together for a mutual benefit [21].

The mentors were a group in the community that had a strong interest in participating in community activities and in working for the future of the community. This indicates they already were a group that had high social capital [23]. Moreover, being involved in a mentoring programme was the channel that allowed the transmission of meaningful resources to the asylum seekers. However, it is noteworthy that they also acquire benefits from this relationship, because understanding better the reality of asylum seekers, they are better prepared to combat discriminatory discourses that circulate within their community. This promotes a more welcoming rural community with more resources to face its own future with a more inclusive perspective.

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