

## **Putting school-based mentors' experience into context: a mixed-methods cross-country comparison**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Cross-national research on cultural differences can help understand what drives, in differing contexts, mentors' commitment to school-based mentoring programs. This comparative study aimed to explore whether adult volunteers, from Scotland and Italy, experience being mentors of vulnerable youth differently.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data from interviews (n = 20) and questionnaires (n = 114) were used to test hypotheses concerning volunteer mentors' perceptions of their role and abilities, as well as motives for participation. According to cross-cultural theories, Scottish mentors should be more likely to identify mentoring with establishing friendly relationships with mentees and promoting youth self-empowerment. They should also be more self-confident and value-driven as volunteers.

**Findings** – Despite the mixed support for the assumptions concerning how the mentor role is conceived, Scottish mentors were less likely than Italians to doubt their abilities and more driven by other-focused and generative concerns.

**Originality/value** – The study reveals significant variations in how volunteers from countries featuring different welfare regimes and cultural orientations experience mentoring. The research advances our understanding of how culturally sensitive approaches can foster mentors' engagement.

**Keywords** School-based mentoring; Volunteer management; Cross-country comparison; Mixed methods.

**Paper type** Research paper

## **Introduction**

School-based mentoring (SBM) is spreading across the globe, as it is viewed as a promising prevention and intervention strategy for promoting the positive development and academic attainment of vulnerable young people. To date, SBM is widely deployed in most English-speaking countries, as well as Middle Eastern, Asian and European countries (DuBois and Karcher, 2005; Goldner and Scharf, 2013; Preston *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, research has paid little attention to understanding whether the drivers of mentors' initial and ongoing commitment to a SBM program (SBMP) vary across socio-cultural contexts.

The current study's overarching goal was to examine the role that culture plays in determining how adult volunteers, in different countries, experience being school-based mentors of at-risk youth. We used a mixed-methods design to explore the perspectives of the volunteers who mentored within the SBMPs provided by MCR Pathways (Motivation, Commitment and Resilience, hereafter MCR) in Scotland and Società Umanitaria (SU) in Italy. Our paper reviews studies that explored the motivating factors and positive outcomes of mentors' commitment to SBMPs, delineating how our contribution fills some knowledge gaps in published literature. Having described the research setting and participants, we outline how data collection and analysis were carried out. The findings show cross-country variations in Scottish and Italian mentors' self-reports on how mentors conceptualize their role and construct their self-efficacy beliefs (i.e., perceptions about their ability to serve as mentors), their initial motives for committing to volunteering within SBMPs and – as a key factor driving the decision to renew the commitment made over time – which positive outcomes they experienced as a result of participation. Finally, we discuss the key implications of our findings and study limitations.

## **Background**

### ***Earlier mentor-centric research***

This section draws on a recent systematic literature review (Bufali, 2022) and reports the findings of 45 inquiries focused on the experiences of those who volunteer as mentors within SBMPs. These studies examined SBMPs that recruited predominantly female (82% of the sources) and student (78%) volunteers. Mentored pupils were evenly distributed across the phase of education attended (24% in middle school, 27% in either high school or elementary/pre-school, 22% in multiple categories) and often identified as at risk (80%). Most SBMPs were delivered in North America (78%). Only 11 studies (27%) employed blended (i.e., multi or mixed) research methods.

### *Motives*

Previous research shows that other-oriented (i.e., selfless) reasons for participating are common among mentors. Being a mentor can afford the opportunity to express altruistic values (Caldarella *et al.*, 2009; Gettings *et al.*, 2014; Karcher and Lindwall, 2003; Rangel *et al.*, 2021; Raven, 2015; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Tracey *et al.*, 2014) or contribute to creating a better society (Ernst and Young and MENTOR, 2015; Hughes *et al.*, 2009; Monk *et al.*, 2014; Wasburn-Moses *et al.*, 2014). Equally frequently, volunteers expect to gain a deeper understanding of the developmental needs of youth or see mentoring as a way to broaden one's horizons, re-evaluate priorities, or learn how to be positive role models (Hughes and Dykstra, 2008; Hughes *et al.*, 2009; O'Shea *et al.*, 2013; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Strapp *et al.*, 2014).

Self-interested reasons are also mentioned, such as fun (Monk *et al.*, 2014; Rangel *et al.*, 2021), personal satisfaction (Hughes and Dykstra, 2008; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004), and increased self-confidence in dealing with others or developing friendships (Hughes and Dykstra, 2008; Hughes *et al.*, 2009; Wasburn-Moses *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, mentors frequently anticipate benefits related to their studies or career (Hughes and Dykstra, 2008; Meltzer and Saunders, 2020; Monk *et al.*, 2014; Rangel *et al.*, 2021; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004).

### *Gains*

Less frequently, volunteers acknowledged that participation provided an outlet to give back (Monk *et al.*, 2014; Raven, 2015) or to develop a renewed understanding of community needs, spurring greater civic engagement (Cavell *et al.*, 2018; Coyne-Foresi *et al.*, 2019; O'Shea *et al.*, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2010; Weiler *et al.*, 2013). Mentors more often developed greater awareness of how to foster positive youth development (Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Wasburn-Moses *et al.*, 2014; Weiler *et al.*, 2013). Mentoring also resulted in self-reflection about the disadvantages that underprivileged young people can experience, which, in turn, shaped how mentors engaged with others (Carter *et al.*, 2001; Hughes and Dykstra, 2008; Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2010; O'Shea *et al.*, 2016).

Conversely, mentors overwhelmingly reported some self-interested gains, such as greater relational skills (Lee *et al.*, 2010; Marshall *et al.*, 2015; McGill *et al.*, 2015; Nelson *et al.*, 2017; Raven, 2015; Wasburn-Moses *et al.*, 2014; Weiler *et al.*, 2013) or insights about their personality (Coyne-Foresi *et al.*, 2019; O'Shea *et al.*, 2013; O'Shea *et al.*, 2016; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Slaughter-Defoe and English-Clarke, 2010). Equally often, volunteers got an overwhelming sense of fulfillment, achievement and pride from a recognition of their positive impact (Banks, 2010; Hughes and Dykstra, 2008; Monk *et al.*, 2014; O'Shea *et al.*, 2013; Raven, 2015). Also, the development of friendships, greater self-esteem/confidence (Coyne-Foresi *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2010; Monk *et al.*, 2014; O'Shea

*et al.*, 2013; Pryce *et al.*, 2015; Raven, 2015) or experience instrumental to their current/envisaged careers (Banks, 2010; McGill *et al.*, 2015; Meltzer and Saunders, 2020; Nelson *et al.*, 2017; O'Shea *et al.*, 2016; Raven, 2015; Trepanler-Street, 2007; Wasburn-Moses *et al.*, 2014) were common benefits of participation.

### *Gaps in knowledge*

Previous studies are of little help in understanding how to boost the commitment of demographically varied groups as they have mostly (78%) focused on student mentors. Most importantly, no study has explored cross-country cultural variations in how mentors navigate the mentoring process, and very little research (18%) has been conducted in educational and socio-cultural settings outside North America. Hence, there is a lack of understanding about how culture affects mentoring practice or which managerial approaches may be better suited to contexts featuring diverse socio-cultural orientations.

### *Cultural aspects influencing the mentor experience*

Despite the lack of empirical studies on the topic, some extant theories (Hofstede, 1983; Schwartz, 1999) provide informative conceptual foundations to examine the influence of culture on the mentor experience across countries. Individualist cultures tend to value the relative independence of individuals from social groupings. Personal fulfillment and validation mostly spring from the expression of one's distinctiveness and individual accomplishments. Hence, people from cultures with individualist values tend to form a more optimistic view of their personal abilities, displaying a greater sense of self-efficacy (Klassen, 2004; Oettingen, 1995). In collectivist cultures, social relations rather become a primary source of meaning and identity expression. Such an interdependent sense of self may translate into lower levels of efficacy beliefs. This is because emphasizing individual (rather than group-level) achievements may be regarded negatively or discouraged (Klassen, 2004; Oettingen, 1995). Moreover, societies are said to exhibit high degrees of power distance (Hofstede, 1983; Schwartz, 1999) when characterized by a broad acceptance of hierarchical order and power differentials in social relations, coupled with an a priori recognition of older people as authoritarian figures. In contrast, egalitarian cultures display low power distance: a greater appreciation for more informal/equal relations and inclusive decision-making.

Socio-cultural superstructures can affect how youth mentoring is conceived, implemented and experienced in a number of ways. While individualist societies are more likely to view mentoring as aimed at promoting mentees' self-determination, sense of competence and autonomy, collectivistic ones see it more as a vehicle to satisfy relatedness needs and enhance youth social cohesion or attachment to the community (Goldner and Scharf, 2013; Preston *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, the stronger

family ties characterizing more collectivist cultures (Alesina and Giuliano, 2013; Gorodnichenko and Roland, 2012) may require greater efforts to legitimize the mentor role. Furthermore, individuals may feel less at ease with mentoring if it entails going beyond the provision of instrumental support and disclosing one's most intimate feelings and personal matters (Goldner and Scharf, 2013; Molpeceres *et al.*, 2012). Also, in egalitarian cultures, individuals may favor more reciprocal mentoring relationships (MRs), conceiving them as friendships, and youth-driven decision-making (Goldner and Scharf, 2013). Conversely, in hierarchical cultures, mentors may be less comfortable allowing mentees to take the lead and more likely to adopt prescriptive approaches. Finally, mentors from individualist cultural systems may appraise their self-efficacy more optimistically, with important implications (Deane *et al.*, 2022; Karcher *et al.*, 2005; Parra *et al.*, 2002).

Prior research (Salamon and Anheier, 1998) has also attributed variations in how volunteering is experienced to the welfare regime characterizing a country: how welfare provision responsibilities are distributed among public and private actors (i.e., households, voluntary sector and market). The foundational premise of functional theories (Clary *et al.*, 1998) is that volunteering is driven by a blend of reasons, some of which are more selfless while others are more utilitarian. These, in fact, span from the need to give effect to pro-social, altruistic and humanitarian values ("Values") to the desire to acquire knowledge and skills ("Understanding") or career-relevant experience ("Career") and from fostering one's social relationships ("Social") or ego development ("Enhancement") to escaping personal problems and negative feelings ("Protective"). Studies have shown that where the state is less engaged in the provision of welfare services (i.e., liberal regimes), altruistic reasons to volunteer can be more prominent, as individuals may feel a greater obligation to assist those who cannot rely on public-sector intervention to fulfill their needs (Hustinx *et al.*, 2010; Hwang *et al.*, 2005). This has important implications: being motivated by other-focused and generative concerns contributes positively to self-efficacy beliefs (Moreno-Jiménez and Villodres, 2010) and to the positive benefits reaped from voluntary work (Morse *et al.*, 2020; Perrewé *et al.*, 2002; Schaffer, 2010; Shoji *et al.*, 2016; Stukas *et al.*, 2016).

### ***Hypotheses (Hps)***

The two European countries considered in the current study feature dissimilar cultures and welfare regimes (Alesina and Giuliano, 2013; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Salamon and Anheier, 1998). The UK embodies a liberal welfare regime, is among the most individualist societies and has weaker family ties and lower tolerance for power distance. In contrast, Italy has a less individualistic and more hierarchical culture, with a strong family ethos.

Based on the theoretical and empirical work reviewed, we anticipated that Scottish mentors – compared to Italians – would be more likely to:

- conceive MRs as friendly and reciprocal relationships between equals (Hp1);
- view mentoring as directed to promote mentees' self-empowerment (Hp2a) rather than to prescriptively provide direction and guidance (Hp2b);
- report a higher sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their mentoring abilities (Hp3);
- endorse other-focused motivations to a greater extent (Hp4).

## **Methods**

### ***Setting***

Within the two cultural settings described above, we focused on two SBMPs, offered by the charity MCR in Scotland (UK) and the charity SU in Italy. The former, with the motto “Be the bridge,” was set up in Glasgow, in 2007, to tackle the social and educational inequalities affecting some of the most vulnerable secondary school students. Approximately 60% of its beneficiaries are looked after by local authorities. The remaining youth, although not formally assisted by social workers, are served as experiencing severe disadvantage (e.g., in informal kinship or families facing addiction problems, and young carers). The SU program began in 2003, operates in five Italian cities and uses the slogan “An adult as a friend.” It targets elementary or middle school students who are considered at risk of disengaging prematurely from education for several reasons, including experiencing dysfunctional family background, child neglect, bereavement, or social and cultural exclusion. In both programs, one-to-one MRs with adult volunteers are established to help pupils acquire confidence in themselves, others and their prospects, focus on their education, overcome challenges and embark on more positive paths.

In both cases, mentor recruitment is handled by program managers who train the volunteers to provide motivational and socio-emotional support to their mentees. Neither of the two organizations expects aspiring adult mentors to meet specific requirements. Nonetheless, the recruitment strategies adopted differ substantially (Bufali, 2022). MCR strongly advocates the work-related gains achievable by mentors to forge partnerships with local employers (e.g., private firms, councils and other public bodies), who allow their staff to mentor during working hours. By contrast, SU is much less reliant on working-age or student mentors. It primarily recruits volunteers among its well-established members (often, retirees) and through their word of mouth.

Applicants' pathways into mentoring are quite similar. Following an initial expression of interest, would-be mentors attend an information session, where the fundamental aspects of the mentoring

approach are explained. The subsequent steps entail an individual interview and a 2-hour group-based training session. The former enables program staff to learn more about the candidates, with a view to matching mentors and mentees with the greatest affinity. The latter aims to provide aspiring mentors with practical guidance about useful strategies to establish a bond with mentees, problem-solve various likely scenarios or engage effectively with youth with different problems and backgrounds.

The central staff further carry out the match-making process, in collaboration with on-site program coordinators (in the case of MCR) and professional psychologists (in SU). Each volunteer is matched with a young person based on geographical proximity, similarity/compatibility of interests, life experiences and personalities. In both programs, local delivery and daily operations are overseen by the program coordinators, who provide ongoing support to the mentoring pairs. These meet once per week in 1-hour sessions usually held on the school's premises for at least one academic year.

### ***Participants***

In total, 20 adult volunteers (MCR  $n = 12$ ; SU  $n = 8$ ), identified hereafter using pseudonyms, participated in semi-structured individual interviews. For MCR, the sample composition reflects the proportions characterizing the whole population of active mentors in Glasgow across most of the dimensions considered, such as mentors' gender and age, mentees' vulnerability and schools' characteristics. For SU, proportional quotas were used as to mentors' gender, age and city of reference (Milan, Rome, Naples), whereas for the remaining dimensions (namely, service and match length, mentees' vulnerability and level of education), the sample is half split.

Larger samples of active mentors were invited, concurrently, to complete an online anonymous questionnaire. For MCR, 255 active mentors were randomly selected and invited to complete the questionnaire. Staff members from MCR provided the first author with an anonymized list that reported an identification code, the gender and the age group of each of the 756 active mentors in Glasgow. With the use of software, 255 codes were randomly extracted and returned to the organizational staff, who administered the questionnaire via email to selected mentors. The analytic sample comprised 42 mentors: 60% were female and 36% male; 21% were aged respectively under 40 or 41 to 55 years, and 26% were aged respectively 56 to 64 or 65 years or older. There were no statistically significant differences between respondents and non-respondents in their distribution across gender and age groups. For SU, all 203 active mentors across Italy were invited to take part. We retained responses from 72 mentors operating in Milan (56%), Naples (31%), Trento (10%) and Rome (3%). Of these, 57% were female and 31% male. All mentors were over 40 years, with 6% aged 41 to 55, 19% 56 to 64 and 74% aged 65 years or older. In this case, the distribution across age and gender groups of the study population was only partially known. Hence, we could not test

statistically potential differences between respondents and non-respondents, so ruling out non-response bias. Additional details on the characteristics of participants can be found in the supplementary materials (Appendix A for the interviews and Appendix B for the questionnaire).

### ***Data collection***

This mixed-methods study, approved by the University of Strathclyde Department of Management Science Ethics Committee, used a concurrent convergent or triangulation design (Creswell, 2012) so that data on the same phenomenon were collected simultaneously using two separate methods. We first tested the soundness of the hypotheses formulated through qualitative analyses and then further validated these using the quantitative dataset. The two sets of findings were then combined using two integration approaches (Johnson *et al.*, 2019): (1) data conversion (creating matrices which show the frequency with which sub-themes were discussed by interviewees) and (2) joint display techniques (checking whether the two sub-sets of findings produced one summative result – see Appendix A).

### ***Data sources***

First, participants were interviewed through video or phone calls, lasting on average 1 hour, to elicit their subjective perceptions about:

- how they conceived and would describe their role (Hp1, Hp2a, Hp2b);
- which factors affected their efficacy cognition (Hp3);
- which anticipated outcomes motivated them to become mentors (Hp4) and were experienced.

Second, as part of a wider survey, a questionnaire used several validated scales to measure relevant constructs and allow hypothesis testing. Possible between-group differences in mentors' *self-perceived confidence* (Hp3) were explored using the 11 items of the one-factor Mentor Self-efficacy Scale (Ferro, 2012). More specifically, respondents rated how confident they felt, when they joined the SBMPs, in supporting youth in a number of areas such as goal setting, problem-solving or academic issues. To assess the relative importance attributed by each group to altruistic and self-serving *initial motivations for volunteering* (Hp4), we employed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary *et al.*, 1998; Teye and Peaslee, 2020), including an integrative item that captured the respondent's desire to volunteer to give back to the community. The corresponding *positive outcomes* were measured by six items, as in the original version of the VFI, reworded following the mentor-specific application developed by Caldarella *et al.* (2010). These latter inventories, and the underlying theoretical framework, were chosen for their potential to allow a fine-grained analysis of pro-social intentions, distinguishing between different forms of intrinsic and extrinsic outcome expectations, as well as their excellent cross-cultural validity.



For all the measurement scales used, reliability results indicated satisfactory levels of internal consistency. Indeed, all the reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) displayed from acceptable ( $.60 \leq \alpha \leq .70$ ) to excellent ( $\alpha \geq .90$ ) values. A confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the original six-factor structure of the VFI and the unidimensional structure of the Mentor Self-Efficacy Scale. Additional diagnostics tests suggested that the model fit was acceptable (minimum discrepancy per degree of freedom below 5; comparative fit index and Tucker-Lewis index near .90 or higher; root mean square error of approximation below .08–.10). Missing data were treated as follows. First, respondents displaying a particularly high person-level missingness rate ( $\geq 65\%$ ) were excluded from the analysis ( $n = 27$ ). Second, once the appropriate tests had been performed, the “mean of available items” method (Newman, 2014) was used to mitigate item-level missingness for composite scales. Finally, given the acceptable rate of construct-level missingness and the outcomes of the Little’s MCAR (missing completely at random) test performed, a complete case analysis was performed (Newman, 2014). Full information on the translation of instruments, properties of inventories and missing data treatment can be found in Appendix B.

### ***Data analysis***

The thematic analysis of interview transcripts was approached with a set of pre-defined, theory-driven codes. Nonetheless, throughout the process, some emerging data-driven concepts were also identified. An initial frame – grounded in the functional approach (Clary *et al.*, 1998) – guided the conceptualization of the motives and positive outcomes of mentors’ participation. Supplementary sources provided the grounds for including provisional themes about additional motives and benefits (Ferro, 2012; Teye and Peaslee, 2020), as well as possible interpretations of the mentor role (Crutcher, 2007; DeJong, 2004; Ganser, 1994). The trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis was enhanced through several strategies (Nowell, 2017). First, we triangulated across methods, searching for agreement or inconsistencies between data sources. Second, we employed peer review and debriefing to ensure that consensus on the interpretations and conclusions drawn was achieved among the co-authors. Reliability, credibility and conformability were further established through member-checking. Indeed, preliminary findings were shared with program managers, invited to provide feedback to establish the validity of the sense-making process undertaken and the verisimilitude of results.

Quantitative analyses used a set of statistical tests: chi-square and Kruskal-Wallis tests and multiple linear or multinomial logistic regressions. These latter included gender, age and months of mentoring experience as control variables. This was done to increase the confidence that detected differences in study participants’ self-reports were not to be attributed to these additional sources of variance.

Indeed, the motivations to volunteer are known to vary based on gender and age and to affect the positive and negative outcomes experienced, as well as volunteer satisfaction, length of service and tenure (e.g., Caldarella *et al.*, 2010; Cavell *et al.*, 2018; Karcher and Lindwall, 2003; Stukas *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, prior research has identified age and length of experience as factors able to affect self-efficacy beliefs (Moreno-Jiménez and Villodres, 2010; Shoji *et al.*, 2016), critical to mentors' and mentees' outcomes and perceptions of relationship quality, as well as volunteers' degree of involvement or relational challenges (Askew, 2006; Deane *et al.*, 2022; Karcher *et al.*, 2005; Parra *et al.*, 2002). Further details about assumption testing and regression analysis results can be found in Appendix B.

## **Findings**

### ***Mentor role***

The first objective of the current study was to explore whether Scottish mentors are more likely to conceive MRs as friendships (Hp1) and as primarily directed to promote youth self-empowerment (Hp2a) rather than to the provision of guidance (Hp2b). To this end, we draw on the metaphors and definitions through which interviewees described their role, MR or overall experience, which clustered in varied conceptual categories (Table 1).

#### *Hp1*

The first two categories of definitions are dominant, and both are concerned with the provision of emotional support. In respect of Hp1, six mentors – all but one Italian – described the mentor as a friend or “travel companion,” emphasizing how they reduced power distance by “levelling the playing field” (Amanda), being “on their ground” (Rupert) or “on an equal footing” (Jane). Similarly, others (all Scottish and mostly female) believed that a mentor – although not a friend – is someone who is there to listen, take an interest in what mentees go through and provide dedicated attention.

#### *Hp2*

Only Scottish male mentors perceived their role as directed at providing instrumental support or, more often, promoting mentees' self-empowerment (Hp2a), helping the mentees to want to help themselves (Bernie) or take the lead (Patrick). Another noteworthy category refers to the provision of guidance by mentors (Hp2b) whose function is to introduce life experiences, perspectives and stimuli different from those that mentees are exposed or used to. Both Scottish and Italian female participants provided definitions of this kind.

### *Summary*

Contrary to Hp1, Italian interviewees were more inclined to conceive the MRs as friendly relationships between equals. Instead, Hp2 had mixed support. Exclusively Scottish mentors – as expected – intended their mentor role as directed to promote mentees' self-determination (Hp2a). However, some of them also associated it with the provision of guidance, in principle less congruent with their more egalitarian cultural orientation (Hp2b).

### *Self-efficacy*

The reasons interviewees doubted their mentoring abilities were wide-ranging and somewhat similar between the two samples. For instance, an Italian mentor attributed her fears and insecurities to engaging in a “completely different thing from what I had done until then” (Cindy). This echoed the words of a Scottish mentor who confessed, “I was just like ‘Oh my gosh, I’ve never done anything like that!’” (Eloise). Also, two Scottish mentors felt that they “didn't know enough” (Giselle) or were not “that experienced” (Celine), questioning their competence to effectively support youth. Similarly, two Italian mentors, given their profile and prior occupation, were afraid they were “not the right person” (Pam). Other similarities between groups pertained to such concerns as not being able or sufficiently prepared to manage difficult situations (Giselle, Cindy), not appealing to or being welcomed by the mentee (Phoebe, Anne) and assuming responsibility over a child's wellbeing (Celine, Cindy). Although similar in nature, problems in self-efficacy beliefs (Table 1) were more widespread among Italian interviewees (75% vs 58%). This supports our Hp3.

Survey data further validated the hypothesis that Scottish mentors score higher in terms of self-efficacy compared to Italian ones (Hp3). Analyses showed strongly significant differences in the baseline self-efficacy scores reported by Scottish and Italian mentors (Table 1), with the former scoring higher ( $\chi^2(1) = 9.731, p = .002$ , with a mean rank score of 68.85 for MCR and 49.09 for SU). Multiple linear regression was used to predict mentors' self-efficacy based on their reference country (and controls). Mentors' country was the sole significant predictor, and respondents' confidence in their mentoring abilities decreased by 0.506 (on a continuous scale ranging from 1 to 4) for Italians.

### *Motivations and positive outcomes*

Other-oriented reasons to mentor (such as the desire to help others or to give back to the community) were expected to be more salient among Scottish mentors (Hp4). Drawing on interview data, we found a general misalignment in the ranking of the motivational domains most frequently cited (Table 1). Nonetheless, in both samples, certain altruistic reasons to volunteer (“Values” for Italian mentors, alongside “Give back” for Scottish ones) were the most reported. Italian interviewees often revealed that their decision to become mentors stemmed from a desire to help the most vulnerable (Pam),

others (Amanda), youth in need (Jane, Cindy, Rupert) or future generations (Cindy, Sara, Lily): “those that most need word of mouth, a ‘passing of the baton’” (Cindy). Scottish mentors’ self-reports more frequently revolved around a theme not traditionally included in the VFI, exemplified by the following quote: “... in the back of your mind, you're doing it because you feel as if you can give something back” (Albert). Scottish mentors often felt drawn to mentoring as a means to enhance the local or broader community and act as drivers of change, taking proactive steps to transform society for the better. Overall, the qualitative analyses did not show a clear-cut demarcation: Italian mentors resonated the most with the altruistic desire to help others, whereas Scots with that of giving back. Also, when considering these two motivational domains together, other-focused reasons appeared slightly more frequently endorsed within the Italian sample (56% vs 50%).

Despite this, and consistent with our Hp4, the Kruskal-Wallis test (Table 1) showed strongly significant differences in these motive scores between the two samples (“Values”:  $\chi^2(1) = 16.964$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a mean rank score of 72.74 for MCR and 46.76 for SU; “Give back”:  $\chi^2(1) = 8.331$ ,  $p = .004$ , with a mean rank score of 62.54 for MCR and 45.70 for SU). Multiple linear regression was used to predict the extent to which respondents were driven by “Values” motivations based on their reference country (and controls). Mentors’ country significantly predicted the importance attributed to the function, which decreased by 1.27 (on a continuous scale ranging from 1 to 7) for Italian respondents. For the second motive (“Give back”), a multinomial logistic regression modeled the relationship between the predictors (country of reference and controls) and membership in the four clusters that rated this motive as “Scarcely,” “Moderately,” “Very” or “Extremely” important. The test showed that being an Italian mentor was significantly ( $p = .015$  and  $.023$ ) associated with an 87% reduction in the likelihood of Italian mentors rating this motive as “Very” or “Extremely” important (OR = .135 with 95% CI .027–.673; OR = .132 with 95% CI .023–.752).

Different explanations may account for the inconsistency between qualitative and quantitative results. First, interviewees were, at least in part, purposively selected. Hence, SU may have directed the researchers toward mentors who met the selection criteria but were also known to be more value-driven than alternative candidates. Second, compared to the completion of an anonymous questionnaire, the interview setting may have led Italian interviewees to overemphasize altruistic motives for volunteering.

Ultimately, it should be noted that the only two motivational domains where Scots had mean ranks higher than their Italian counterparts are those more other-oriented (namely, “Values” and “Give back”). Hence, Italian mentors appeared more driven than Scots by self-serving motives. Additionally, except for the “Values” function, Italian mentors’ scores for positive outcomes are

generally lower than those of corresponding motivations. The opposite applies to Scots. Thus, Italians reaped – to a lesser extent than Scots – outcomes that they viewed as more important than their Scottish counterparts did.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

## Discussion

The current cross-country comparative study adds, in many respects, to the relatively underdeveloped body of research literature about school-based mentors' experiences.

We found that the metaphors and definitions provided by mentors to describe their role were not always consistent with the assumptions drawn from extant cross-cultural theories (Goldner and Scharf, 2013; Molpeceres *et al.*, 2012).

For instance, in Italy – despite its more familistic and authoritarian culture – interviewees were greatly at ease with describing the MRs as friendly relationships between equals, involving the provision of emotional support (Hp1). It is difficult to discern whether the adherence of many Italian mentors to the organizational motto “An adult as a friend” was genuine, and truly internalized, or rather resulted from a response bias (i.e., social desirability). If the first assumption holds, such results would indicate that an organizational culture that strongly emphasizes the friendly and equal nature of MRs – as within SU – can offset wider cultural influences (namely, a greater tolerance to power distance, combined with more marked within-pair age differences). Also, exclusively Scottish mentors perceived their role as directed to promoting mentees' self-determination and sense of competence (Hp2a). However, the assumption that providing direction and guidance is, in principle, inconsistent with less hierarchical cultures was not strongly supported (Hp2b) since definitions from both Scottish and Italian mentors focused on this function.

Given such deviations from theory-driven hypotheses, the results highlight the importance of program directors examining firsthand program participants' metaphorical perceptions, which may be key to managing their expectations and maximizing the chances of success (DeJong, 2004; Ganser, 1994). For example, the expectations of volunteers who assimilate mentoring to “stepping back” or “heeding” rather than to “leading” or “giving practical help” are likely to diverge substantially. Similarly, the compatibility between mentees who expect to be provided with direction or concrete assistance and volunteers rather inclined to remain in the background or let youth find their own way may be questioned.

Prior studies provide evidence of perceived self-efficacy being among the elements that most significantly influence mentors' overall perceptions of the experience (Bufali, 2022; Deane *et al.*, 2022; DuBois and Karcher, 2005; Parra *et al.*, 2002; Rangel *et al.*, 2021). Thus, program coordinators should engage in continued monitoring of mentors' confidence in their abilities and provide particular support, guidance and encouragement when mentors feel ineffective. Although such recommendations apply to both programs, mentors from SU were more likely to struggle due to the doubts about their abilities to serve as mentors. In line with cross-cultural self-efficacy literature (Klassen, 2004; Oettingen, 1995), we found that mentors' self-appraisals of efficacy were generally lower in Italy (Hp3). Studies have widely emphasized the importance of supporting mentors through a number of self-efficacy-enhancing measures, such as vicarious learning, hands-on and interactive training, broad support networks and ongoing constructive feedback (Askew, 2006; Rangel *et al.*, 2021). Our findings suggest that these may be even more helpful for mentors operating in countries with a less individualist cultural orientation. Furthermore, SBMPs that base the selection of aspiring mentors on the appraisal of their confidence (e.g., Calogero, 2018) must recognize that such assessments are likely to vary across countries and, hence, are urged to apply context-sensitive thresholds.

Findings clearly show that the achievable gains to be advertised to recruit volunteer mentors vary across contexts. As prior research has highlighted, in liberal regimes, people are more likely driven to help others, altruistically, as part of their citizenship responsibility (Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003; Hustinx *et al.*, 2010; Hwang *et al.*, 2005). Consistent with this, Scottish mentors found prime motivations in the sense of duty toward others and the wider community (Hp4). Hence, recruitment campaigns that emphasize other-oriented motivations to volunteer are likely to resonate with a broad audience. Nonetheless, for Scottish mentors, the mean ranks of several self-serving outcomes (i.e., the self-enhancement, ego protection and career-related gains accrued) were higher than those of the corresponding motivations (Table 1). This reveals that Scots, ex-post, valued more than Italians these unexpected gains. Therefore, using research evidence, testimonies and other institutional communication to raise public awareness about the capacity of mentoring to satisfy these additional unanticipated needs may prove effective in increasing the number of individuals willing to become mentors. In contrast, in Italy, individuals appeared already aware and disposed to acknowledge that this form of volunteering could flow from some self-serving motivations. Yet, data also indicated that Italians – although generally more driven than Scots by a number of instrumental motives – felt they benefited less than their counterparts on the corresponding outcome domains. For organizations facing similar situations, the issue seems more about ensuring – through an ongoing monitoring and any suitable corrective actions – that mentors accrue sought-after benefits to an adequate extent.

### ***Limitations***

Despite the use of retrospective event history techniques, the small scale of the evaluation and its cross-sectional nature limit generalization of findings and causal inferences, which would require replication of fieldwork in multiple settings, time points and wider samples. This would also strengthen the conclusions of the cross-country comparison. First, we could not account for all the differentiating factors that may have influenced the outcomes of interest (e.g., mentee's age or risk status; mentor's educational level, wider beliefs or personality traits; type and perceived quality/adequacy of training and support received). Second, the sample width achieved did not allow to rule out construct or structural inequivalence (van de Vijver, 2015) by checking whether the factor structures of the inventories administered were the same across cultural groups. Finally, for the Italian sample, risks from non-response bias could not be ruled out. This should be considered while interpreting findings from the quantitative analysis.

### **Conclusions**

Given the paucity of cross-country comparative research on the drivers and effects of mentors' participation in SBM, the findings of the current study strongly advance mentoring practice and research. One of its major contributions lies in expressly framing the analysis in comparative terms, uncovering some variations in how mentoring is experienced within countries featuring diverse welfare regimes and cultures. We provide a valuable first look into how cultural dimensions can affect the mentor experience while offering SBMPs initial insights for improving volunteer recruitment and retention. Crucially, the suitability of several volunteer management practices was found to be context-dependent. Accordingly, recruitment and retention practices found to be effective in a given context should not be regarded as automatically transferable to different settings. Given this and the worldwide diffusion of SBMPs, this paper provides impetus for more fundamental comparative research on which practices, in differing contexts, most contribute to the effectiveness of volunteer management.

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