BRINGING TOGETHER COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH – THE "MENTORING OF REFUGEES" PROJECT

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The Project "Mentoring of Refugees" (MORE) implements a randomized controlled trial (RCT) into an existing survey on refugees in Germany. The treatment is the participation in a mentoring relationship with a local resident, which is organized by a non-profit organization. The project aims at analyzing whether mentoring programs between refugees and local residents impact refugees' integration trajectories. This paper explains the implementation of the RCT, addresses challenges during the implementation and field phase, and provides recommendations for future research projects.

Le projet Mentoring of Refugees (MORE) met en œuvre un essai contrôlé randomisé (ECR) dans le cadre d'une enquête déjà existante concernant les réfugiés en Allemagne. La démarche consiste à instaurer une relation de mentorat avec un résident local, qui est gérée par une organisation à but non lucratif. Le projet vise à analyser si les programmes de mentorat entre les réfugiés et les résidents locaux ont un impact sur les parcours d'intégration des réfugiés. Ce document explique la mise en œuvre de l'ECR, aborde les difficultés rencontrées pendant la phase de mise en œuvre et de terrain et fournit des recommandations pour les futurs projets de recherche.

For the past two decades, Germany has seen increasing numbers of volunteers. In 2017, between a fourth and a third of the German population engaged in volunteering activities (Hansen et al. 2018, Burkhardt and Schupp 2019), which is close to the European average (Norway has the highest share of volunteers (39 percent) and Greece the lowest (16 percent) (Hansen et al. 2018, 662). Volunteering can thus be considered a vital part of the welfare system, as many volunteers work in welfare initiatives such as food banks or shelters. However, not only can voluntary work complement the welfare state, it also plays a vital role in providing opportunities for bridging ties between generations, classes, and between newcomers and long-standing residents. Voluntary work, for instance, played a crucial role in providing clothing, food, and access to local networks to refugees in Germany during the wave of forced migration to Europe in 2015 and 2016. Around a third of the German population volunteered or donated during this period for this specific cause (Jacobsen, Eisnecker, and Schupp 2017), among them many for the first time in their lives (Karakayali and Kleist 2016, Hamann and Karakayali 2016).

While a number of anecdotal examples are known, scientific analyses of the 'effects' of voluntary work are scarce; particularly in working with refugees. This dearth of evidence stands in

sharp contrast with the importance of reliable information on migration and integration for the effective allocation of resources. Non-profit organizations that organize volunteer work receive public support through tax benefits and public funds, and refugees and other vulnerable groups need access to programs that are able to address their needs. Hence, determining which volunteer programs are effective in their objectives is an important policy question.

The research project "Mentoring of Refugees" (MORE) contributes to this area of research. The project received funding from the Leibniz-Association and is conducted by the German Socio-economic Panel (SOEP), in cooperation with the German Institute for Employment Research (IAB) and the Research Centre for the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). At the center is a randomized controlled field experiment in which refugees who express interest in a mentoring-style relationship with a German resident are randomly assigned into participant ("treatment") and non-participant ("control") groups (Legewie et al. 2019). The mentoring was delivered by the social start-up "Start with a Friend e.V." (SwaF 2019), a non-profit organization that matches German residents ("locals") and newcomers in 13 German cities in order to create ties between the two groups. To randomly select refugees for participation in SwaF's program, we used the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany as a starting point, an annually conducted panel study of refugees living in Germany that started in 2016 (Kühne, Jacobsen, and Kroh 2019). The respondents of this survey are asked whether they would be interested in participating in SwaF's program, and those interested are randomly assigned into treatment and control groups. The main goal of the project is to identify the effect of bridging ties on various markers of integration, such as language acquisition, employment, and health. All data collected as part of MORE will be publicly available through the research data center of the German Socio-economic Panel from 2021 onward (SOEP 2019).

IMPLEMENTING A FIELD EXPERIMENT INTO A PANEL STUDY

Randomized controlled trials (RCT) are considered the gold standard for identifying causal effects (e.g. Sibbald and Roland 1998). Due to the random allocation into treatment and control groups, any differences in, for instance, integration levels between groups after the intervention can be attributed to participation in the mentoring program and not individual characteristics or unobserved variation. However, to date only few studies exist that explicitly observe the effect of asylum support systems and volunteering on integration trajectories in an experimental setting. Joona and Nekby (2012) evaluate a government-run counseling program in Sweden. They analyze whether intensive coaching fosters labor market access for migrants and show the positive effect of the counseling program. Lange et al. (2017) describe the implementation of a sports intervention for refugees in Germany and observe the short term impact of the program on employability. Battisti et al. (2019) analyze a job search assistance program for refugees provided by an NGO based in Bavaria, Germany, as a tool for fostering labor market access. The authors find a significant increase of 13 percentage points in employment for the treatment group after twelve months. Weiss and Tulin (2019) observe how the subjective feeling of being mentored among Arabic speaking humanitarian migrants fosters labor market access.

While these studies show the great potential and important contributions of RCT study designs, they also reveal a major challenge. RCTs usually lack information on participants prior to participating in the experiment, such as migration and integration trajectories or pre-migration experiences in advance of the baseline interview. Such information is vital as it potentially helps modeling selection into the RCT and hence helps in identifying treatment effects.

By using the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany as an anchor study, MORE avoids such problems. The survey already started in 2016, a year prior to the baseline study, and thus provides extensive information on (potential) participants, which can be used when analyzing data from the field experiment.

THE STARTING POINT FOR INTERVENTION: THE IAB-BAMF-SOEP SURVEY OF REFUGEES IN GERMANY

While RCTs are often created independently of other projects, MORE is linked to the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany. This survey is a random sample of people who immigrated as asylum seekers and refugees to Germany between 2013 and 2016, irrespective of their current legal status. Additionally, it is designed as a panel study and is integrated into the German Socio-economic Panel (SOEP), a panel study of German households collecting data annually since 1984 (Goebel et al. 2019, Kühne, Jacobsen, and Kroh 2019). The mode of the interview is face-to-face computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). All field material is provided in German, English, Standard Arabic, Urdu, Pashto, Farsi/Dari, and Kurmanji (text and audio).

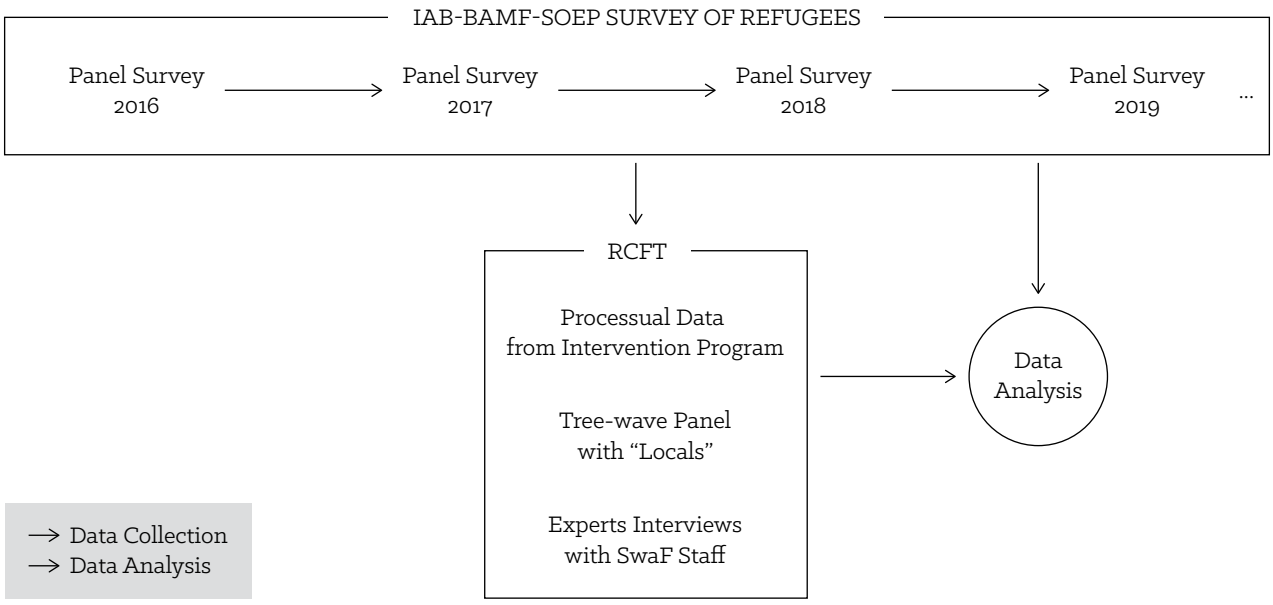
Most adult participants of the survey come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea, are male, and are under 40 years of age. By 2020, three waves of the refugee panel will be made available to the academic public. The latest wave (2018) contains 4,376 individuals living in 3,061 distinct households. It covers a vast array of topics such as migration routes, health and well-being, economic integration, and political attitudes. Wave 2 (2017) serves as the (pre-treatment) starting point for the MORE intervention.

THE INTERVENTION: A MENTORING PROGRAM FOR REFUGEES

The intervention itself, namely the one-on-one mentoring between a refugee and a local, is provided through the association SwaF. It is one of many initiatives that has helped refugees to connect to locals since 2015. While many refugee initiatives are geared towards support in acquiring the German language or to find adequate housing, SwaF is particularly well-suited to study effects of bridging ties because its main goal is to establish a friendship 'at eye-level'. According to SwaF, refugees and locals should meet on a weekly basis for about two to three hours over a period of six months, leaving it up to them to decide on joint activities. In addition, SwaF offers parties of the entire mentor/mentee community, cultural events, and field trips, as well as support in case of conflict in the partnership. Since 2014, the social start-up has matched more than 6,000 refugee-local pairs in more than 20 German cities, making SwaF one of the more established initiatives of its kind.

In order to identify effects of the program on various outcomes, MORE relies on five data sources. First, panel data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees provides in-depth information on all refugees and serves as the baseline for recruiting. Additionally, if consent to linkage is provided (80% of participants gave consent), this survey data can be matched to administrative data on employment trajectories, collected by the Institute for Employment Research[1] (IAB 2019). Second, information on the local mentors is gathered by means of a three-wave web panel.[2] Next, data on the matching process is provided, first, through SwaF as processual data (e.g., spell data on the matching process), and, second, through qualitative expert interviews with SwaF volunteers to get a deeper understanding of the functioning of the matching process and volunteer work. Figure 1 illustrates the research design.

FIGURE 1: MORE RESEARCH DESIGN



Source: Legewie et al. 2019

Collecting the data follows a multi-stage process and we are aware that different selection processes are taking place (see figure 2). Starting in June 2017, refugees who were residents in the 13 locations in which SwaF was active at the time were asked whether they were interested in participating in SwaF's initiative.[3] Those who confirmed (N=446), were randomly allocated into treatment (N=234) and control groups (N=212). Participants in the treatment group registered online with

1 The Institute for Employment Research is the research unit of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit).

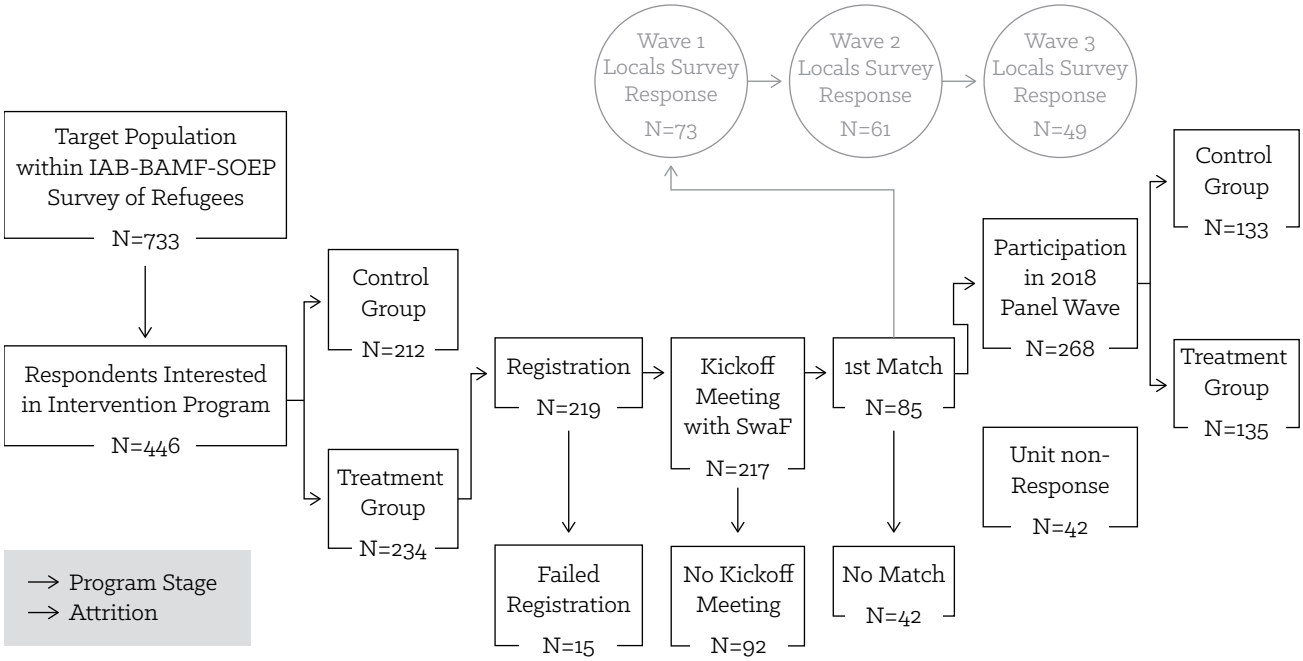
2 The web survey was developed at the SOEP and carried out by the Centre for Empirical Social Studies (ZeS) at the Department of Social Sciences of Humboldt-University Berlin.

3 Berlin, Potsdam, Dresden, Leipzig, Hamburg, Oldenburg, Cologne, Bonn, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Freiburg, Landau, and Mannheim.

the social start up during the face-to-face interviews. Of the 234 participants assigned to the treatment group, 219 actually registered with SwaF. Next, SwaF met personally with N=127 refugees. The remaining N=92 treatment group participants were, for instance, no longer interested in participating or their contact information changed. On the local side, participants were not randomly selected, but recruited through the SwaF's usual channels (e.g., social networks, university announcements). Eighty-five of those refugees who met with SwaF were matched to a local by March 2018. Based on SwaF's mission to initiate friendships between refugees and locals, SwaF staff tried bringing together people considered a good "fit," based on characteristics such as shared interests or similar age.

As a panel study, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees allows tracking participants and non-participants of the field experiment over time, even after termination of the intervention. In the 2018 survey wave, the treatment and control groups were re-interviewed. Fifty-five of the 85 refugees who were matched initially were still participating in the panel survey and answered questions regarding their experiences with SwaF and the partnership. All had indeed met their mentoring partner and in N=26 of the cases, the mentoring relationship was still intact. Meanwhile, N=133 survey participants remained in the control group of interested non-participants.

FIGURE 2: MORE IMPLEMENTATION



Source: Legewie et al. 2019

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In recent years, panel studies have started focusing particularly on migrant and refugee groups, which opens up new possibilities for conducting survey and field experiments. Above all, the design presented in this paper offers an opportunity to test a social initiative which, in turn, could serve as a blueprint for government-sponsored (large scale) programs. In order to successfully implement an RCT into an existing survey, it is crucial that all participating parties (in our case refugees, mentors, volunteering agency, and researchers) work together long-term in order to reap the benefits of this specific research design. In the following, we want to discuss four key points that, based in our experience, are crucial in order to successfully implement such an RCT: finding a volunteering agency that is willing to cooperate, ensuring interviewer engagement with the study goals, easy to handle registration for the program, and avoidance of panel attrition.

One key to success in implementing randomized controlled field trials is to partner with players already operating in the field. Due to the cooperation with SwaF, we did not have to recruit mentors ourselves. Therefore, one major aspect of this project could be delegated to an organization who had years of experience not only recruiting interested locals to participate but also communicating successfully with refugees and making

them feel welcome. Their program in the 13 cities was able to provide the "treatment" dimension of our experiment. Building such capacities from scratch would have required considerably more personnel and know-how. Moreover, in this way the study directly feeds back into an existing association that is constantly developing to provide excellent services to all volunteers and refugees involved. The combined experience between the MORE and SwaF teams in research and community organizing also enabled the project partners to address obstacles that inevitably emerge during the implementation of a complex field experimental design. First, from a research perspective it is important that the random character of the RCT is not compromised. Therefore, it was vital that every refugee interested, ideally, would be matched to a local. However, SwaF had to minimize disruption to their work outside MORE. This became especially relevant regarding their local volunteers, who may have objected to and dropped out of the program had they not been able to communicate with participating refugees at least rudimentarily in either German or English. Hence, SwaF had to exclude respondents whose German and English proficiencies were too low. This resulted in an (unavoidable) interference with the random allocation. While this can be incorporated in the analysis via the intention-to-treat framework (Montori and Guyatt 2001), it did result in a decreased size of the group of actually treated refugees.

In order to successfully implement field experiments in existing surveys, respondents' cooperation is obviously vital. A precondition is a convincing presentation of the structure and aims of the program. Survey respondents usually do not anticipate receiving such an offer and might therefore be extra cautious. As a result, interviewers play a crucial role as intermediaries. MORE heavily relied on interviewers who had to present the program. As has been shown repeatedly (e.g. Korbmacher and Schröder 2013), interviewers differ in their ability to carry out interviews and their persuasiveness in presenting new context to the interviewees, and this dynamic has likely played an important role during MORE implementation. In fact, around 35 percent of the variance in the willingness to participate in the program can be attributed to interviewer effects (Legewie et al. 2019). Previous studies show that well-trained interviewers and those who are convinced that the survey is meaningful are most likely to produce high consent rates (e.g., to participate in the panel or to record linkage) (Sakshaug, Tutz, and Kreuter 2013). Therefore, training interviewers and convincing them of the importance of such experiments is crucial for a successful implementation.

Closely connected to the interview situation is the time lag between expressing interest in the program and actually registering for it. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to implement the registration for the program within the CAPI set-up of the Survey in which the experiment is implemented. As mentioned, 19 participants assigned to the treatment group did not register with SwaF, mainly due to technical problems during registration and following up with the potential participants later on. Moreover, we experienced some drop out between these two steps as people got nervous when being asked to provide their information for use by third parties (i.e., SwaF). It is essential to provide extensive but accessible information, particularly for vulnerable groups like refugees. Such information should emphasize that the project serves as an honest offer to link refugees to locals to create inter-cultural friendships, with (non-profit) scientific purpose on the part of the organizers.

A last problem worth mentioning is panel attrition in the baseline study itself. Attrition regularly occurs in panel studies, even more so with a highly mobile population like refugees who are still in the process of settling in a new country and region. For field experiments incorporated into a panel study, attrition over time is especially problematic, as the effect of the treatment cannot be observed if respondents drop out before the post-intervention interview takes place. As with other panels, attrition was an issue in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, which somewhat curtailed the statistical power of the MORE data. Therefore, future studies should consider devising additional incentives for those who stay participants throughout the field experiment.

In sum, we suggest that future projects implementing field experiments into an existing panel study should:

1. closely cooperate with a civil organization that works in the field of research;
2. train interviewers carefully to minimize interviewer effects;
3. minimize time between asking for interest and participant registration of participants; and
4. provide incentives during the experimental phase in order to decrease panel attrition.

OUTLOOK

Implementing an RCT into an existing panel study by means of a community intervention is challenging, but such a design combines many analytic strengths and has considerable upside. RCTs are able to account for unobserved heterogeneity and thus allow causal inference. Panel studies, on the other hand, provide detailed individual-level information about participants and often track respondents over several years, thus providing in-depth information prior to and post-treatment. Moreover, working with an organization that has already established firm roots on site facilitates field access.

Besides providing scientific knowledge, such field experiments are capable of bringing community organizations

and social science research together and thereby facilitating knowledge transfer across borders of otherwise often separate groups. This goes far beyond the evaluation results made available to the community organization that provides the treatment. It makes social science research instantly available for the public and those providing support 'on the ground.' With our data, we hope to not only show which kind of self-selection into the SwaF program took place. We also aim to give feedback as to how locals and refugees experienced the time of the mentoring, and what constituted a good and a bad mentoring experience for both groups. Moreover, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees enables the observation of several indicators that might be positively affected by the mentoring relationship: labor market access, language acquisition, social network development, and wellbeing. Additionally, the survey of locals will shed light on the question of how such a program can attract more volunteers in order to overcome a bottleneck of mentoring programs.

We hope that our project and our experiences can serve as a template for bringing together community organizations and social science research, so that the future will provide more bridges between the two communities.

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