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The Key to Success? Social Network Brokerage in Buddy Programmes for Newly Arrived Migrants in the Flemish Region of Belgium

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how social network brokerage takes place in buddy programmes for newly arrived migrants from the perspectives of local volunteers and coordinators. There is research showing a positive effect of brokerage on social capital, but the literature on migrant mentoring shows that the objective of social networking is not always achieved. In this study, we aim to provide a more fine-grained picture of how buddy programmes contribute to the social networks of newcomers by adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective. We examine (a) the experiences of volunteers who take on the role of buddy to support the newcomer and (b) the modus operandi of coordinators responsible for monitoring the buddy programme. This will give us more insight into how they fulfil their brokerage role and which conditions of success there are for brokerage in buddy programmes for newcomers. We do this on the basis of interview data within a case study of buddy programmes in the Flemish region of Belgium. We find wide variety in brokerage behaviour of buddies (conduit, tertius gaudens, and tertius iungens). Our findings suggest that buddies can act as gatekeepers, where newcomers are deliberately kept separate from the host society. This exposes the limitation of working with volunteers to achieve network expansion. The paper concludes that integration policies take too little account of the agency of those involved, impacting brokerage behaviour. With this, we contribute to the literature on befriending programmes for newcomers within the context of migrant integration policy.

Keywords Brokerage · Social networks · Immigrants · Buddy programmes · Integration

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Introduction

Driven by an increasing focus on active citizenship, buddy programmes have gained popularity in various areas of welfare policy during the past decades, such as mental health care, youth care, and poverty alleviation (Raithelhuber, 2023). Buddy programmes essentially concern an organised social intervention in which two individuals are matched one-to-one, through the intervention of a (professional) organisation, to meet a request for support from one of the two parties. Generally, the volunteer, who will be referred to as 'buddy' in this paper, and the help receiver spend dedicated time together (Stock, 2019). Commonly, a distinction is made between three types of buddy programmes: mentoring, befriending`, or coaching. While a mentor offers guidance or instruction in order to achieve pre-determined goals as a part of a time-limited process, a befriender acts as a friend often over a longer period of time (Balaam, 2015, p.30). Coaching, on the other hand, has been associated with a shorter-term performance focus to stimulate a personal change process (Stokes et al., 2021, p.142). Spurred by the 'local turn' in migrant integration policies and especially following the European refugee crisis of 2015, buddy programmes are now also being implemented to promote the integration of newly arrived migrants (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008). In the context of immigrant integration, a buddy may provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, such as guidance in the newcomer's job search, improving language skills, increasing awareness of values of the host society, and increasing access to resources and services (Behnia, 2007). The premise is that these buddies, who are established members of the host society, have privileged access to relevant cultural, economic, or social capital to facilitate migrants' integration into society (Stock, 2019). While social capital and networks are often considered synonymous, social networks can be specifically defined as groups of individuals with whom one maintains relatively stable connections to meet essential living needs (Hendrix, 1997). Building on Putnam's (2007) work, social capital can be viewed as 'social networks and the associated norms of trustworthiness and reciprocity', enabling newcomers to access social support (Ryan et al., 2008).

In this paper, we focus on social network expansion within buddy programmes for three reasons. First, buddy programmes for newcomers are a new and barely studied practice. Moreover, although it is an important goal of the intervention, scholarly research on what makes buddy programmes effective in achieving network expansion for newcomers in the host society is lacking (Crijns & De Cuyper, 2022). Second, previous research results are ambiguous. Studies to date show that the expectation of social network expansion is not automatically realised. Research on migrant mentoring to work has, for example, demonstrated that buddies do not always perceive building the social network of newcomers as a task (De Cuyper & Vandermeerschen, 2018). Furthermore, the organised encounters that take place within buddy programmes do not necessarily translate into close, long lasting relationships (Mahieu et al., 2019). Third, the existing literature on buddy programmes for newcomers primarily draws from research on workplace mentoring, with relatively limited attention allocated to befriending

initiatives, which focuses more on social relationships and are increasingly advocated as policy tools for migrant integration (Balaam, 2015; Lai et al., 2017). Social work discussions have largely overlooked the phenomenon within the professional field (Raithelhuber, 2023).

In our research, we address these limitations by exploring how local volunteers (buddies) and coordinators of buddy programmes, operating according to the befriending method, contribute to expanding the social networks of newcomers in the receiving society. In order to do so, this paper draws on literature on brokerage and social networks to improve our understanding of how and under which conditions buddies and coordinators perform their brokerage role with a view to strengthen the newcomer's social network (Obstfeld, 2005). The current literature in organisational sociology on social networks and brokerage typically focuses on strictly structural patterns, where brokers connect two unconnected alters (Obstfeld et al., 2014). Rather than examining social network structure, our focus lies on behavioural orientations. This approach offers new insights by focusing on conduct, or 'behaviour by which an actor influences, manages, or facilitates interactions between other actors', thereby going beyond the usual focus on effects or outcomes in studies on migrant integration and buddy programmes (Obstfeld et al., 2014, p. 141; Raithelhuber, 2023). In contrast to earlier studies focusing on social network structure, the scientific value of this paper is thus the analysis of brokerage behaviour from a multi-stakeholder perspective, explaining network expansion within the context of buddy programmes. In addition, we examine how the agency of newcomers plays a role in brokerage behaviour, as individual volition and action are often overlooked by the structural approach to brokerage. In the majority of traditional sociological research on networks, individual agency is absent (Tasselli & Kilduff, 2021). New insights into brokerage within buddy programmes may enable practitioners to potentially refine these programmes, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in facilitating network expansion for newcomers. More research on how buddy programmes impact network expansion for newcomers is necessary, because investing in building social networks is essential in realising integration policy (Pulinx, 2016). The following research question was posed:

> How do volunteers (buddies) and coordinators of buddy programmes fulfil their brokerage role with a view to expand the social network of immigrant newcomers in the host society?

In order to answer this question, the study presents arguments based on data drawn from 40 interviews with buddies and coordinators in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. The structure of the article is as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework (1), which includes a conceptual overview of brokerage theory, which will be utilised in this paper to better understand the network expansion of newcomers, and discusses the importance of (ethnically diverse) social networks. Then, we describe the methodology (2) adopted to conduct the research. Subsequently, we present our case study, namely buddy programmes within the context of the renewed Flemish Integration Decree. In Sect. 3, we present the findings structured according to the different forms of brokerage behaviour exhibited by

buddies (i.e. conduit, tertius iungens, and tertius gaudens) and by coordinators of buddy programmes (i.e. brief and sustained iungens). Last, we pay special attention to the agency of newcomers. The paper ends with concluding remarks (4) on the objective of social network expansion in buddy programmes and the implications for further research.

Theoretical Framework

Social Network Brokerage: Conceptual Overview

This paper focuses on brokerage behaviour by volunteers (buddies) and coordinators to understand social network expansion of newcomers within buddy programmes. In a buddy programme, a coordinator assumes a brokerage role by introducing two individuals who are strangers to each other, a local volunteer (buddy) and newcomer, to each other (Balaam, 2015). This corresponds to the non-tie condition in Burt's (2004) definition of structural holes, which is based on the absence of ties between two alters. Literature on social networks and brokerage typically employs this very specific meaning of brokerage, involving a particular structural pattern in which two otherwise disconnected alters are connected through a third party, here the coordinator (Marsden, 1982; Obstfeld et al., 2014, p.136). In other words, brokerage literature traditionally tends to focus on social network structure. However, Obstfeld and colleagues (2014) claim that brokerage can occur without structural holes, while structural holes can exist without any form of brokerage. Thus, since the identification of structural holes within a network does not necessarily implicate any specific social activity, including brokerage, Obstfeld et al. (2014) argue for a broadened approach to brokerage to emphasise the many different forms of social behaviour it encompasses. Therefore, a distinction is made between so-called 'brokerage structure', which refers to social network structure (open vs. closed networks), and the social behaviour of third parties, referred to as 'brokerage process'. Thus, the authors broaden the definition of brokerage to the following: 'behaviour by which an actor influences, manages, or facilitates interactions between other actors', to imply a broader range of social activity that different forms of brokerage activity might involve (Obstfeld et al., 2014, p.141). We will employ this definition, which focuses on social behaviour, to examine how buddies and coordinators fulfil their brokerage role, aiming to broaden the social networks of newcomers, in this article. We build our analysis on the distinction made between three strategic orientations to brokerage action: conduit brokerage, tertius gaudens, and tertius iungens. In conduit brokerage, the relationship between alters is not necessarily changed. Whereas in moderation brokerage, as in the case of tertius gaudens and tertius iungens brokerage, the broker B alters the relationship between A and C in some way (Obstfeld et al., 2014, p.145).

First, conduit or 'channelling' brokerage involves purely the passing of information, ideas, or other knowledge between the brokered parties, without the broker necessarily changing their relationship (Obstfeld et al., 2014). This brokerage

activity is consistent with the knowledge advantage associated with structural holes (Burt, 2004).

Second, tertius gaudens or 'the third who enjoys', refers to conflict, competition, or unfamiliarity between alters actively encouraged by the broker (Obstfeld et al., 2014, p. 145). The broker benefits by not intervening in the conflict or the disconnection between the brokered parties or actively pits them against each other (Obstfeld et al., 2014, p. 138). This brokerage orientation may bring the broker into a dominating or favourable position (Simmel, 1950).

Third, and most relevant to our case study, tertius iungens or 'the third who joins' brokerage involves the broker's introduction of disconnected individuals or the facilitation of the new coordination between connected individuals (Obstfeld, 2005, p.100). In buddy programmes, this broker orientation causes that two strangers, the buddy volunteer and newcomer, are introduced to each other. Where the gaudens leverages disconnection or negative ties, the iungens actively pursues coordination. Network expansion is likely to involve this connecting of previously unconnected parties (Obstfeld et al., 2014). Obstfeld (2005) suggests a distinction between brief iungens and sustained iungens. Whereas brief iungens refers to discrete episodes of introduction, sustained iungens brokers continue to coordinate the relationship.

In practice, processual brokerage often entails a combination of these strategies, since the triad enables more complex social dynamics than those found in the dyad (Simmel, 1950). However, greater heterogeneity in relationships poses anyone operating in such a network context with more of an 'action problem', or the challenge of coordinating individuals with different interests, unique perspectives, and language, presenting greater risk of failure (Obstfeld, 2005). Increases in heterogeneity would therefore demand greater brokerage intensity in order to produce cooperation, coordination, or other results. Therefore, tertius iungens behaviour increases in importance in contexts of diversity, such as in buddy programmes. Nevertheless, tertius iungens might create unintentional or unseen harm by facilitating a bad match (Obstfeld et al., 2014). When there is a mismatch between the buddy and the newcomer, benefits of the intervention are significantly lessened or may even cause stress to the participants (Crijns & De Cuyper, 2022). Immigrant newcomers may be uncertain about how they will be received by the majority group, including their buddies in this case (Valentine, 2008) (Fig. 1).

Buddy Programmes and Social Networks

Instead of being confined to specific local settings, such as neighbourhoods, migrant networks may extend over a vast geographical expanse, encompassing transnational connections. Nevertheless, proximity remains crucial for certain types of support (Ryan et al., 2008). Social networks are seen as important sources of social capital for migrants in order to access social support in the host society, such as companionship, but also emotional, informational, and instrumental support (Ryan et al., 2008). Social network formation is not solely an individual endeavour, but rather a collaborative process involving both newcomers and the receiving society (Pulinx, 2016). However, previous research indicates that newcomers often lack frequent
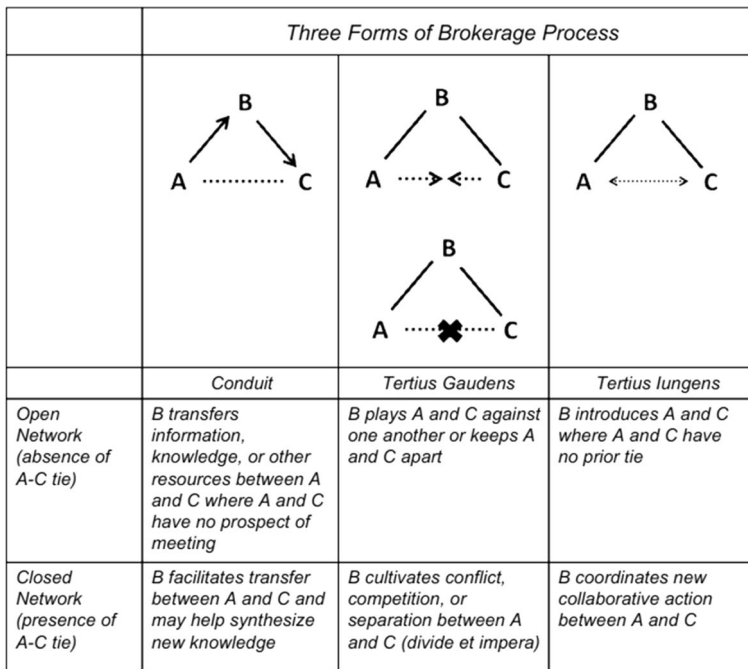
	Three Forms of Brokerage Process		
	Conduit	Tertius Gaudens	Tertius Iungens
Open Network (absence of A-C tie)	B transfers information, knowledge, or other resources between A and C where A and C have no prospect of meeting	B plays A and C against one another or keeps A and C apart	B introduces A and C where A and C have no prior tie
Closed Network (presence of A-C tie)	B facilitates transfer between A and C and may help synthesize new knowledge	B cultivates conflict, competition, or separation between A and C (divide et impera)	B coordinates new collaborative action between A and C

Fig. 1 Three forms of brokerage process–Obstfeld et al. (2014)

encounters with the host population. Despite newcomers frequently expressing the need or demand for social contacts, they do not seem to succeed in making contact with host society members without active support and guidance (Pulinx, 2016). The primary reason is that interethnic contact is often subject to structural constraints (Huizinga & Van Hoven, 2018; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Muijres & Aarts, 2011; Smith et al., 2021). Spatial proximity by itself, for instance, is insufficient to facilitate social relationships between migrants and host society members (Valentine, 2008). It is often observed that newcomers organise themselves differently in time and space than the established community, resulting in daily life-paths of newcomers and established citizens that may not necessarily cross (Huizinga & Van Hoven, 2018). Different daily routines may even result in parallel lives (Valentine, 2008). Additionally, encountering prejudice and discrimination are seen as significant obstacles to build social bonds with the established population. Furthermore, the acquisition of language and cultural skills appears not always sufficient to eliminate barriers to friendship formation (Smith et al., 2021). The lack of inter-ethnic contact between newcomers and host society members can lead people to focus on activities inside their 'own group' (e.g. ethnic minority). Consequently, so-called 'structural holes' are created in the information flow between groups in society (Burt, 2004).

A buddy programme is a dedicated intervention to bring newcomers and host society members together, a situation thus unlikely to occur spontaneously. Buddy programmes may address the aforementioned challenges related to inter-ethnic and intercultural contact. By doing so, it offers newcomers the opportunity to engage in

bridging in the host society beyond their ethnic community (Weiss & Tulin, 2019). The premise of buddy programmes partly aligns with Gordon Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which posits that bringing different groups together, under certain conditions, is an effective way to reduce prejudice and promote social integration. Intercultural contact would reduce prejudice by increasing knowledge of the out-group, reducing fear of contact, and increasing empathy between social groups. Bridging social groups is the mechanism through which brokerage becomes social capital. More specifically, people whose networks are not limited to their own social group have greater ability to bridge the structural holes between groups, and thus have greater access to a broader diversity of information (Burt, 2004). In other words, brokerage across the structural holes between groups may provide newcomers with life chances and options otherwise unseen (Burt, 2004, p.349, p.354). However, it is important to note that for newcomers, transnational contacts also serve as significant sources of emotional support and advice. Migrants obtain support through a combination of established and newly formed networks, encompassing contacts in both their country of origin and the host society (Ryan et al., 2008).

Although participation in a buddy programme automatically expands the network of non-family ties of newcomers by at least one member of the host population, earlier research indicates that the dyadic relationship as such may be insufficient to increase the newcomer's social network (Austin et al., 2020; Jaschke et al., 2022). Recent literature on youth mentoring stresses that to take full advantage of the potential to broaden the participant's social network, explicit connecting behaviours are required to increase newcomers' social connections beyond the dyad (Austin et al., 2020). This allows us to conclude that, despite buddy programmes having great potential to expand newcomers' social networks in the host society, this expectation is not automatically realised.

In sum, this paper draws on a broadened approach to brokerage to scrutinise the social behaviour of coordinators and buddies in expanding the social networks of newcomers. We build our analysis on three strategic orientations to brokerage action: conduit, tertius gaudens, and tertius iungens. Bringing newcomers and host society members together in buddy programmes may overcome the challenges related to inter-ethnic contact. However, some literature suggests that social network expansion in intercultural encounters is not automatically realised.

Data and Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the process of brokerage within buddy programmes aimed at expanding the social networks of immigrant newcomers in the receiving society.

Case Selection

Purposeful sampling was utilised to understand brokerage behaviour of both volunteer buddies and coordinators. We selected those buddy programmes based on

the concept of befriending and explicitly aim to enhance the social network of the newcomer, alongside other objectives such as familiarising them with the city or municipality and improving language skills. This selection provides insights into the process of social network brokerage. This means that we focus on buddy programmes that aim to provide relational rather than instrumental support (Balaam, 2015). Buddy programmes that, for example, exclusively focus on finding housing or employment for newcomers are thus not included in our sample. The selected buddy programmes are implemented both in cities and smaller municipalities. Newcomers typically join a local buddy programme through their social assistant, the Integration Agency, or by word of mouth. Once buddies and newcomers are matched, the coordinator generally organises a joint kick-off event to explain the programme's details and offer tips for smooth interaction. Buddies and newcomers then collaboratively decide on activities they wish to engage in together, such as going for a walk, visiting the library, or cooking. The organisation encourages regular meetings, typically twice a month. Throughout the programme, participants may receive evaluations, as well as engage in group activities involving all dyads. After a certain period, organisational guidance ceases, but buddies and newcomers are free to continue meeting independently.

On the one hand, interviews were conducted with local volunteers ($N=25$) committed to take on the role of buddy. Buddies are established members of the host community, which means that they have been living in the host country for a long time and are proficient in the majority language, and thus commit to offer guidance to a newcomer for a certain period (e.g. 6 months). These volunteers are often, but not always, female ($N=16$), retired (allowing them to have sufficient time), and active in various voluntary initiatives. Buddies are in a unique position as brokers, as they can deliberately create bridging ties between newcomers and host society members (Jaschke et al., 2022). These volunteers generally join the programme by word of mouth or through local communication channels (e.g. regional newspaper). No prior knowledge is required, but volunteers receive support from the coordinator of the local buddy programme. Some have participated in the programme multiple times. In five instances, the buddies terminated their involvement prematurely before the scheduled end date of the buddy programme. The main reasons for early termination of the programme are differing expectations between dyad members, different styles of communication, not clicking, because the newcomer felt obliged to participate in the project, or because the newcomer is forced to return to the country of origin (Appendix I Table 1).

On the other hand, coordinators ($N=15$) of 15 different buddy programmes were interviewed. Coordinators are typically paid professionals employed by the city or municipality to monitor the buddy programme. Coordinators are important brokers within buddy programmes since these professionals are responsible for matching the dyad and facilitating their relationship. It is important to note that coordinating the buddy project is rarely a full-time occupation, but is often only one part of these professionals' job responsibilities. Next to that, most of the buddy programmes examined do not have a long history of existence, with the exception of three projects that have been active for over 10 years. In the selected cases, evaluations and training sessions offered by coordinators often concentrate exclusively on the buddies, rather

than on the newcomers, suggesting a potential imbalance on whom the coordinator's brokerage role focuses (Appendix II Table 2).

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with buddies and coordinators ($N = 40$) between December 2022 and April 2023, until theoretical saturation was reached. We focus on the brokerage role of these two groups of stakeholders, because coordinators are responsible for matching a newcomer with a local volunteer (buddy), while a buddy can be seen as an intermediary between the newcomer and the established population. The individual interviews lasted between 45 and 120 min and were conducted in Dutch. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed in line with the thematic analysis techniques (TA) of Braun and Clarke (2017), using NVivo-software. After repeatedly reading the transcribed data with attention to meanings and patterns, codes were identified in relation to interviewees' lived experiences, views, and perspectives on buddy programmes, as well as behaviour and practices within these programmes (Braun & Clarke, 2017). The hallmark of TA is its flexibility, as it was employed in this paper for both inductive coding (data-driven), as deductive coding (e.g. based on missions statements of buddy organisations), and for capturing both explicit and latent meanings (e.g. mechanisms) (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Next, the codes were grouped into themes and sub-themes. Finally, during the reduction phase, selective coding was employed to elaborate on core concepts and explore their relationships with other concepts (Wester & Peters, 2009). Ultimately, we categorised our interview data into three main themes: brokerage behaviour of buddies, brokerage behaviour of coordinators, and network agency of newcomers.

Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, data processing, and their right to withdraw from the research. All respondents gave both their verbal and written informal consent for an audio-recorded interview. To protect the identity of the respondents, all interview data were anonymised. The study followed the guidelines of the Social Sciences and Humanities Ethics Advisory Committee of the University of Antwerp (SHW_21_150).

Case Study: The New Flemish Integration Decree and Buddy Programmes

Buddy programmes for newcomers have been in existence in Belgium since 2011. While originally driven by civil society, buddy programmes have become more and more institutionalised in some European countries (Crijns & De Cupyer, 2022). Also the Flemish Government has introduced buddy programmes as a new formal instrument in migrant integration policy. Besides the three existing pillars, namely the participation of newcomers in a Dutch language course, a social orientation course, and career coaching, a fourth pillar has been added to the civic integration programme, namely 'social networking and participation'. Newcomers are offered a tailor-made trajectory of at least 40 h in the form of a buddy programme, an introductory internship in a company, an association, organisation or local administration, or volunteer

work. Compulsory integration participants (so-called third country nationals including refugees), who are not working or studying, are obliged to participate in the networking and participation programme from the 1st of January 2023. Making (components of) the civic integration programme obligatory is a convergent trend in European states' policies on migrant integration (Joppke, 2007). The purpose of implementing buddy programmes in the civic integration programme is to allow newcomers to establish social contacts with the host population and to build trusting relationships. The Flemish government hopes that people, both the person integrating and those around them, will gain insight into the world of others and learn to embrace diversity. The host society would also make the necessary efforts to this end (Vlaamse Regering, 2020). Buddy programmes seem to lie at an intersection of integration models, with some criticising them as assimilating, while others attribute multiculturalist characteristics to them (Joppke, 2007). Importantly, the directing role for implementing the fourth pillar rests with local governments. Both the subsidiarisation of social policies and the emergence of local migrant integration policies strengthen the importance of the local as a site for migrant integration (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008). In short, buddy programmes for newcomers are introduced as a promising tool for promoting integration by means of a low-cost intervention (Jaschke et al., 2022).

Findings

This paper draws on brokerage theory to gain insight into social network expansion within buddy programmes for newcomers. The findings are presented under the following headings: brokerage behaviour of buddies, brokerage behaviour of coordinators, and network agency.

Brokerage Behaviour of Buddies

The buddy can assume a meaningful brokerage role by bridging the gap between newcomers and the host population. We find that buddies perform three brokerage strategies: conduit (informing), tertius iungens (bridging), and gaudens (gatekeeping) brokerage.

Informational Role

A first brokerage role the buddy takes on is that of a conduit broker. Conduit brokerage involves the passing of information between parties, where the broker B (the buddy) is a go-between or intermediary between A (the newcomer) and C, without necessarily changing their relationship (Obstfeld et al., 2014). In this role, the buddy, who is more familiar with the local environment, thus provides the newcomer with informational support by offering advice and suggestions (Ryan et al., 2008). By doing so, he can be an important referrer for the newcomer. The interviews showed that buddies inform newcomers about all kinds of services which can come in handy

if you are new to a city or municipality, such as where to find the library or how to register with the local hobby club. The buddies also argue that they often accompany the newcomer the first time, hoping to lower the threshold this way. Several buddies believe that this will give the newcomer access that would otherwise not be available due to discrimination and other obstacles. Next to providing this practical information, several buddies indicate that they inform newcomers about customs and cultural norms of the host society, enabling them to better understand and adapt to situations. By exchanging information and showing them the way, these volunteers hope that newcomers will use these services and possibly meet host society members there. The conduit broker role of buddies thus emphasises the self-reliance of newcomers in broadening their social networks. 'You do build bridges. When you, as a buddy, accompany the newcomer, you're much less likely to get fobbed off'. (buddy 16).

> Precisely to make them feel that there are many things to experience here and that they should not stay in their […] small circle. That they have to get out there because if you don't show them, they won't do it. They stay […] with the limited people they know. That way [by informing and showing the way], they dare to enter into our society. (buddy 19)

However, we argue that two dynamics may affect the conduit brokerage role of buddies. First, this brokerage role presupposes a certain profile, namely someone with a considerable amount of knowledge of the local landscape of institutions, services, and associations, and their operation in order to inform and refer the newcomer. Consequently, not every buddy is able to perform this role and thus contribute to newcomers' network expansion in this manner. The following quote from a coordinator confirms this assumed knowledge profile of the buddy: 'They just know how the social fabric works in the municipality". (coordinator 11).

Second, buddies are more likely to take on a conduit brokerage role when the coordinator of the buddy programme assumes a more restrained role (brief iungens). When activities within the buddy programme are not clearly defined by the coordinator, it is common for buddies to assume responsibilities that extend beyond the actual task description of the buddy programme, such as providing information in terms of housing, job search, and finances. About half of the buddies suggest that this has shifted the focus from social networking to offering far-reaching informational support to newcomers, thus jeopardising the original objective. Fulfilling this informational need of newcomers was often perceived by buddies as more urgent than focusing on the relational aspect.

Bridge Role

As discussed earlier, tertius iungens brokerage involves the broker's introduction or facilitation of two other parties (Obstfeld et al., 2014). We find that some buddies assume this role by introducing the newcomer to their own social network, by

connecting newcomers with family members, friends, neighbours, or other acquaintances, inviting them into their homes, etc.

> For me, it was about opening doors and showing possibilities. For example, I know she [the newcomer] used to play badminton. So I put her in touch with a friend who is very much into badminton so they could play together. (buddy 10)

One buddy (18) indicates that, for practical reasons, he integrates the newcomer into his social life: "I tried to integrate him [the newcomer into his own circle of friends], because if that was an extra 'task' that came with it [seeing him one-to-one], it would not have been doable for me". Various buddies emphasise the importance of spontaneity in this type of brokerage. They do want to introduce the newcomer into their network, but only if this feels 'organic' and not forced. Conversely, we find that buddies, although matched with a single person, frequently establish connections with the newcomer's family and, in some cases, offer them assistance. Apart from the newcomer's family, the buddies indicated limited interaction, if any, with other individuals of migration backgrounds. Therefore, we find that network expansion often occurs unilaterally and buddies' social networks do not diversify. The ethno-cultural diversification envisaged by the renewed Flemish integration policy evidently applies solely to the newcomer's network and not that of the buddy.

Nevertheless, there are three important observations which complicate tertius iungens behaviour of buddies. First, our findings indicate that not every buddy has a social network to introduce the newcomer to. Some are even lonely and therefore participate as volunteers to meet new people. This is illustrated by buddy 20: 'I don't see many people myself, so how would I introduce the newcomer to new people?'.

Second, about six respondents indicate that they see a limited role for buddies in the ethnic diversification of social networks. According to them, newcomers eventually fall back on their own ethnic community. Newcomers with children, they said, have more opportunities to build a network since there are more points of contact, such as school and play groups. Having children requires local practical support and enables to access particular types of localised networks (Ryan et al., 2008).

Last, although it is an objective of buddy programmes in this study, we find that some buddies did not perceive network expansion as a task or were not even aware that this is an objective of the programme, resulting in their limited efforts to connect newcomers with third parties. These three findings demonstrate that buddies do not fulfil, or only to a limited extent, a iungens brokerage role.

Gatekeeper Role

The interviews show that not every buddy allows the newcomer to enter their private sphere. Some explicitly stated that they do not want to share personal matters with the newcomer nor build an intimate relationship. Coordinators therefore noted that introducing newcomers to buddies' social networks cannot be expected from these volunteers. 'I don't want too much mixing. That's why I deliberately don't introduce the newcomer to my network. I need my privacy'. (buddy 5).

Sometimes the buddy's social network is not open to meeting the newcomer. Several volunteers testified about distrust among their friends and family regarding migration and ethnic-cultural diversity and therefore do not introduce the newcomer. One buddy even stated that she did not tell her peers that she was engaging in volunteering for newcomers, assuming they would disapprove of it. This finding is supported by the constrict theory, positing that increased diversity may result in people less trusting of other ethnic groups (Putnam, 2007). The following quote indicates fear in the buddy's social circle about the influx of migrants, holding her back from bringing the newcomer she was matched with: 'You know, I have a lot of friends, but in that area there is a lot of restriction in the circle of friends. The distrust of: There are more and more of them [migrants] coming'. (buddy 4) The deliberate exclusion of newcomers from the buddies' social network shows that buddies assume the role of a tertius gaudens broker, maintaining unfamiliarity between parties in the absence of similarities (Obstfeld et al., 2014; Simmel, 1950). In this respect, buddies operate as gatekeepers of their social network. The tertius gaudens role of buddies highlights two underlying dynamics.

First, we find that a certain segment of the host population is shielded from the newcomer by the buddy. Furthermore, we observe that buddies often make the decision of separation in the newcomer's place, indicating a specific form of paternalism. For example, buddy 8 did not introduce the newcomer to his friends to avoid an uncomfortable situation due to a language barrier, without consulting the newcomer. Second, despite implications from the Flemish integration policy, it is important to note that the settled population is not homogeneous. The reluctance within the social circles of buddies to engage with the newcomer suggests that only a segment of the host society is receptive to integrating into newcomers' social networks. This is also reflected in a selection effect: buddy programmes often attract volunteers who are already (somewhat) open to ethnic diversity, and thus only reach a part of the host population.

Brokerage Behaviour of Coordinators

When examining the brokerage role of coordinators, we observe strong differences in the intensity or relative effort of brokerage behaviour (Obstfeld et al., 2014). We can distinguish between, on the one hand, brief iungens, where the role as coordinator is rather limited, temporary, or distant, and sustained iungens on the other, where the facilitation of the coordinator is ongoing (Obstfeld, 2005).

Brief Follow-up

This more distant form of follow-up is typically forced because of limited resources and time available to coordinators (Crijns & De Cuyper, 2022). In a brief iungens role, brokerage is limited to matching and possibly an introduction of the dyad. The coordinator matches buddy and newcomer, often based on gut feeling, but also on common interests, geographical location (i.e. ideally, the dyad lives in the same city or municipality), and participants' preferences. It should be noted that three

coordinators indicated that they match the next available volunteer with a newcomer, without too much consideration of specific criteria, due to a lack of time. Subsequently, the coordinator can facilitate their initial introduction during a preliminary meeting, typically arranging their subsequent appointments. However, this meeting does not always take place. Two coordinators facilitated solely the exchange of phone numbers between the parties, refraining from further intervention under the assumption that their direct communication would suffice. After getting acquainted, the coordinator lets the dyad shape their relationship largely on their own and only seldom or never intervenes. In other words, a coordinative role diminishes in importance over time or is simply not offered (Obstfeld et al., 2014). The following quote is from a coordinator who moved into the background after the dyad's introduction:

> Then I'll let it go. You guys can agree. You can communicate by yourselves. Decide for yourselves what you are going to do, send me a picture every now and then, and let me know how it has been. Then I say: 'OK, we'll see each other again in three months. (coordinator 11)

The restrained role of coordinators has important implications for broadening the social networks of newcomers and raises some significant issues. Although networking is an objective of the intervention, some coordinators stated that they do not know whether they effectively achieve network expansion for newcomers with the buddy programme, which reveals a limited understanding of the actual effects of their brokerage role. Another reason for coordinators' limited involvement is that network building is often not the primary objective of the buddy programme, with the focus instead being on practising the majority language and familiarising newcomers with the city or municipality. The 'official' objective of network expansion pursued by the Flemish government thus risks to become subordinate. Nevertheless, the interviews with the buddies show that they did not necessarily perceive the brief iungens role of coordinators as negative. For the majority of the buddies interviewed, knowing that there is someone they can turn to, is enough. Additionally, several volunteers stated that they appreciate the autonomy they were given. Only one buddy complained of being on her own and of having figured out for herself which services she and the newcomer could turn to for certain questions.

Sustained Follow-up

When coordinators have more time and resources at their disposal (e.g. when coordinating the buddy programme is a full-time job), they are more inclined to take on a sustained brokerage role. In a sustained iungens role, several coordinators claim that they first meet potential buddies and newcomers separately before bringing them together. In these meetings, expectations regarding the programme are probed. Moreover, the coordinator polls whether the match in mind is the right one. This might be understood as an expression of the double interact referring to the act-response-adjustment interactions between parties (Obstfeld et al., 2014; Weick, 1979). These double interacts lay the foundation for the actual matching, where the coordinator assumes a sustained tertius iungens role.

In sustained activity, coordinators continue to facilitate the relationship between the buddy and the newcomer after their introduction. They constantly monitor the relationship between dyad members by contacting them regularly to assess how the relationship develops. In case of difficulties, they indicated to intervene. Sustained coordinators also check whether the contact frequency is sufficiently high. To achieve integration outcomes, these coordinators claimed that it is necessary for the dyad to meet on a regular basis. In addition, some coordinators reported suggesting activities to dyads, such as visiting the library or theatre. Furthermore, training sessions, group activities, and intervisions were organised, providing opportunities for dyads to share their experiences with the programme. These sessions also served as evaluation platforms for coordinators to gain insight into the progress of outcomes. Group activities, facilitating interaction among different dyads, were highly appreciated by the buddies. These activities fostered discussions on shared challenges and promoted collective problem-solving. Some buddies also indicated that they have met up with other dyads afterwards.

> You see that a lot comes up during these intervision sessions, because they hear things from others. And you see that buddies are relieved like: I'm not the only one who comes across that or It's normal that I sometimes struggle with that. (coordinator 13)

These findings suggest that a sustained iungens role of coordinators can positively impact networking of newcomers, as there is a greater focus on thoughtful matching, regular evaluation of the dyadic relationship, and more guidance in general, ensuring the long-term commitment of buddies, thus increasing the chances of lasting relationships (Behnia, 2007).

Network Agency

Individual attributes of the target group, here immigrant newcomers, cannot be overlooked as they were found to significantly impact brokerage behaviour. We can distinguish between individual volition on the one hand and complex life circumstances on the other.

First, in the interviews different buddies stated that, for various reasons, not every newcomer wishes to interact with other people besides the buddy or to broaden their social network in the host country. For example, some primarily wish to make use of the buddy programme to practice the majority language or to receive practical support, such as help with administration and the search for housing. 'The newcomer I was matched with wanted to be able to speak Dutch as soon as possible to get his degree, so he was little interested in those informal contacts'. (buddy 18) Other newcomers are considering returning to their country of origin one day. A key finding here is that many buddies indicated that the assumption that newcomers entering a buddy programme have no or a limited social network is not always true. Some newcomers already have a network in the host society, often consisting of people from their ethnic community. Within this context, several buddies stated that they

were the first individuals from the host society with whom the newcomers developed a more informal contact. This refutes the portrayal of newcomers as 'passive' and shows that they do take initiative in building social networks in the established society (Lamba & Krahn, 2003). Nevertheless, ethnically homogeneous networks are being devalued by renewed integration policies (Vlaamse Regering, 2020). In addition, the roles of buddies are largely responsive to needs. Consequently, if the newcomer does not want to establish new social relationships with the host population, the buddy becomes limited in engaging in a tertius iungens broker role, thus in introducing the newcomer to other parties. Additionally, akin to buddies, not all newcomers desire intensive contact, resulting in weak ties with these volunteers.

Second, the living conditions of newly arrived migrants may complicate brokerage behaviour by volunteer buddies. The interviews show that post-migration stressors, such as stress about housing and job search and mental health problems (e.g. refugee trauma), in some cases, dominate the dyadic relationship (Gower et al., 2022). Likewise, limited financial resources would reinforce the social isolation of newcomers. Several buddies also mention a lack of time among newcomers who are often forced to combine a job with an integration course and childcare. According to five respondents, some newcomers have enough on their plate and do not prioritise networking with the host population, which impedes iungens activity of buddies. Simultaneously, the pressing demand of newcomers for practical assistance during their initial integration period in the host country promotes conduit brokerage, wherein buddies inform newcomers about various resources. Moreover, the need for practical support is often perceived by buddies as more urgent than establishing informal contacts or forging friendships. Thus, transferring information (conduit) becomes more relevant in complex life circumstances than establishing connections with the established population (iungens), as illustrated by the following quote: 'It turned into a pretty functional affair, where I did some things for him like translating documents and informing him about schools, but there wasn't really a friendship". (buddy 12) The aforementioned highlights the impact of the agency of newcomers on brokerage in buddy programmes.

Discussion and Conclusion

With this study, we contribute to the literature on buddy—and more specifically befriending programmes for newcomers. We draw on brokerage theory to understand social networking of newcomers within the context of the renewed Flemish Integration Decree. Therefore, we focus on brokerage behaviour of volunteer buddies and coordinators of buddy programmes.

Our study shows that buddies perform their brokerage role according to three strategic orientations towards brokerage (conduit, tertius iungens, and gaudens), with especially iungens activity revealing valuable networking opportunities for newcomers (Obstfeld et al., 2014). We find a strong variation in brokerage behaviour shown

by these volunteers, for which we distinguish three possible explanations. One explanation relates to the buddy's profile. A conduit role, for instance, presupposes buddies with extensive knowledge of institutions and services in order to inform newcomers, while a tertius iungens role presupposes buddies with a well-established social network to introduce the newcomer in. In a tertius gaudens role, buddies face distrust within their social network, leading them to operate as gatekeepers to deliberately separate newcomers from host society members. Another explanation for this wide variation in brokerage behaviour is the impact of the coordinator's brokerage behaviour on that of the buddy. Our research demonstrates that when coordinators take on a brief tertius iungens role, the focus of buddies may shift from networking to providing far-reaching informational support (conduit). Sustained coordinators on the other hand, may exert greater influence on how these dyadic relationships develop, thus positively influencing network expansion. A last explanation includes the agency of newcomers, which is found to play a critical role in what orientation towards brokerage buddies adopt. Some newcomers do not wish to expand their social networks in the host society, complicating tertius iungens behaviour by buddies. Moreover, we find that complex life circumstances of newcomers foster a conduit broker role of buddies.

The wide variation in broker behaviour shows that networking through volunteers cannot be enforced. This is due to the fact that buddy programmes for newcomers occur partially within the realm of the private sphere (Raithelhuber, 2023). Volunteers' buddies hold a position of power in deciding whether or not to facilitate the networking of newcomers. Therefore, networking seems dependent on their goodwill, indicating an asymmetry in the relationship with the newcomer. Moreover, we find that an ethno-cultural diversification solely applies to the newcomer's social network and not to that of the buddy, suggesting that networking in buddy programmes is one-way only, as implied by previous research (Mahieu et al., 2019). This implies that the social network of some newcomers in the host society, mostly consisting of individuals from their own ethnic community, is not perceived as valuable as the social capital offered by the volunteers. This entails the risk that status inequalities and relationships of dependence between newcomers and buddies are rather reproduced in buddy programmes than effectively transformed (Stock, 2019). Buddy programmes thus seem to lead to mixed results for network expansion for newcomers. This is in line with previous research that states that the expectation of network brokering is not automatically realised (De Cuyper & Vandermeerschen, 2018; Mahieu et al., 2019; Muijres & Aarts, 2011). While some dyads turn into close relationships (strong ties) and connect with third parties, for others the contact remained rather superficial or instrumental (weak ties). This is not necessarily disadvantageous, as within the context of migrant integration, weak ties are recognised as important resources for facilitating mobility opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). These variations are consistent with earlier studies showing that these organised relationships vary considerably (Brinker, 2021).

Our findings have clear implications for the renewed Flemish Integration Decree. The underlying assumption of implementing buddy programmes as a policy instrument for migrant integration is the belief that newcomers will build a social network through one-to-one interactions with their buddy. A certain degree of transitivity is taken for granted, with newcomers connected to their buddies' connections (Holland & Leinhardt, 1971). However, our study shows that this policy assumption takes too little account of the agency of those involved. Complex life circumstance revealed that the actual needs of newcomers may diverge from the primary objective of expanding networks with the host population within buddy programmes, thus causing this objective to become secondary. Some buddies, on the other hand, were not willing to introduce newcomers into their social networks, assuming a tertius gaudens role. We argue that the context is agentic and determines which broker orientation participants of a buddy programme adopt (Stokes et al., 2021). As a result, social connections for newcomers with individuals other than their buddy resulted from the buddy programme selectively. This allows us to conclude that the Flemish integration policy's assumption, that a buddy automatically results in an expanded social network for the newcomer, is incorrect. The paper concludes that, despite the agency of stakeholders significantly impacting brokerage behaviour, buddy programmes may positively stimulate newcomers' social connectedness, as the support provided by buddies can take many different forms. Since network expansion is not achieved automatically, the paper argues that a gain can be made by making stakeholders explicitly aware of their role as intermediaries (De Cuyper & Vandermeerschen, 2018).

In the course of conducting this research, some limitations became apparent. First, given the temporary involvement of these volunteers, it remains unclear what the long-term impact of participation in buddy programmes is on network opportunities for newly arrived migrants (Gower et al., 2022). It remains to be seen how social networks of newcomers develop. Over time, some will grow and diversify, while others stay within their ethnic-specific network. Second, the mere focus in this paper on the social capital, provided by local volunteers assuming the role of buddy, fails to capture the importance of the spatial dispersion of migrants' social networks (Ryan et al., 2008). Third, it should be noted that, in practice, different orientations towards brokerage are intertwined, and behaviours of buddies and coordinators are not necessarily straightforwardly classifiable into these roles. Further research on the impact of buddy programmes on the social network expansion of newcomers should pay more attention to social ties in spatial and temporal terms (Ryan et al., 2008). Moreover, future research could further address asymmetries between buddies and newcomers, as the intervention seems prone to reproduce power imbalances

(Raithelhuber, 2023). Last, interviewing newcomers is imperative to gain more insights into networking outcomes within the context of buddy programmes. Nonetheless, the value of providing a detailed picture of the behavioural orientations of buddies and coordinators, with the aim of strengthening the newcomer's social network, remains significant. This paper not only contributes to the advancement of scholarly research on befriending interventions for migrants but also offers policy and practical insights that may guide buddy programmes towards network expansion for newcomers.

Appendix

Table 1 Research participants: buddies

Respondents	Sex	Age category	Employment
Respondent 1	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 2	M	55–60	Permanent job
Respondent 3	M	60–65	Retired
Respondent 4	F	50–55	Permanent job
Respondent 5	F	45–50	Unemployed
Respondent 6	F	25–30	Permanent job
Respondent 7	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 8	M	45–50	Permanent job
Respondent 9	F	60–65	Permanent job
Respondent 10	F	45–50	Permanent job
Respondent 11	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 12	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 13	F	40–45	Permanent job
Respondent 14	F	65–70	Retired
Respondent 15	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 16	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 17	M	60–65	Retired
Respondent 18	M	30–35	Permanent job
Respondent 19	M	60–65	Retired
Respondent 20	F	65–70	Retired
Respondent 21	M	40–45	Permanent job
Respondent 22	F	60–65	Retired
Respondent 23	M	65–70	Retired
Respondent 24	M	50–55	Permanent job
Respondent 25	F	25–30	Permanent job

Table 2 Research participants: coordinators of buddy programmes

Respondent	Sex	Organiser	Province	Start date buddy programme
Respondent 1	M	Civil society initiative	West Flanders	2016
Respondent 2	F	Civil society initiative	Antwerp	2018
Respondent 3	F	Local government	Antwerp	2012
Respondent 4	F	Local government	Antwerp	2012
Respondent 5	M	Civil society initiative	Antwerp	2021
Respondent 6	F	Local government	Antwerp	2012
Respondent 7	F	Government agency	Limburg	2018
Respondent 8	F	Local government	Limburg	2021
Respondent 9	F	Local government	Flemish Brabant	2013
Respondent 10	M	Government agency	Flemish Brabant	2017
Respondent 11	M	Local government	West Flanders	2023
Respondent 12	M	Local government	Flemish Brabant	2017
Respondent 13	F	Local government	East Flanders	2017
Respondent 14	F	Government agency	East Flanders	2021
Respondent 15	F	Local government	East Flanders	2021

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Declarations

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