

## **Unaccompanied refugee minors and resilience: A phenomenological study**

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**ABSTRACT:** Unaccompanied child migration, propelled by war, political strife and instability is an increasingly serious global problem. Refugee youth contends with numerous challenges as they adjust to living in a new country. Although their capacity for resilience is being given the deserved recognition, studies where their views are taken into account greatly outweigh in number those where the voices of young refugees directly narrate how they bounce forward in the face of an uncertain future (Walsh 2002). Resilience scholars are challenged to move beyond a narrow understanding of youth refugee resilience by conducting research on their life situations exploring their own perspectives. This article describes some of the insights gained from a phenomenological study— whose methods are particularly effective at capturing and illuminating the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives— undertaken with unaccompanied minors living in Germany. The narrative approach used to explicate their narratives highlights seven major coping strategies: (1) Treasuring personal identity, (2) Maintaining cultural identity, (3) Networks of support and social negotiations, (4) Nurturing the need to belong, (5) Embracing a positive outlook, (6) Perceived self-efficacy and personal characteristics, (7) Adopting a growth mindset & self-enhancement expectations. The empirical data of this research show that URM are active agents in choosing meaningful pathways to resilience and purposefully navigate through the numerous challenges in their lives.

**KEYWORDS:** unaccompanied refugee minors (URM), resilience, coping strategies, phenomenology, children's perspective

*“Each child, if given the opportunity, has a unique story to share and it is most likely that embedded within their experiential stories are essences of resilience.”*

(Kanji & Cameron 2010: 23)

## INTRODUCTION

War, civil and international armed conflict, and other atrocities around the world force each year, thousands of children and youth<sup>1</sup> to flee their own countries and migrate to the Western world (Markowska-Manista & Sawicki 2019). By the end of 2016, 65.6 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations with 51% of the refugee population constituted by children below the age of 18 (UNHCR 2017). Germany saw a steep rise in the number of refugees in the year 2016; among them, many were unaccompanied<sup>2</sup> minors (URMs). In quest of security, life quality, work, and education opportunities, these youths enter Europe unaccompanied, without parents or siblings. They are fleeing the trauma of war, escaping poverty, natural catastrophes or oppression in their home countries like human rights violations, sexual abuse or forced prostitution, fear of impending harmful practices (e.g. genital mutilation and forced marriage) and of imminent recruitment as child soldiers (Bhabha 2014). Having lost one or both parents – as a result of displacement, acts of war or illnesses – or being separated temporarily as a strategy to ensure their safety and increase the chances of receiving refugee status, many lodge an application for asylum in Germany hoping to prepare the way to the new land for other family members. One of the key destinations for URMs who enter Germany is Berlin (Parusel 2009).

When in Germany, URMs have finally reached one of the wealthiest countries in the world where state authorities take responsibility for their well-being. Nevertheless, the services available to them are not always well-targeted to address their specific needs and often the legislation in force loads their psychological state with even more stress, failing to serve in refugee children’s best interest. Parusel (2009) points out one such inconsistency in German legislation regarding the legal capacity of unaccompanied minors in comparison to other European countries. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which Germany ratified in 1992, classifies as minor a person under the age of eighteen. However, German law treats all unaccompanied minors as adults if they are over or when they reach the age of sixteen. As

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<sup>1</sup> This study will refer to ‘refugee’ children/adolescents, therefore, the terms “child” or “children”, “youth”, “adolescent”, or “minor” are used interchangeably and will refer to a person under 18, the legal age of majority in Germany (Parusel 2009).

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the term *unaccompanied* is used to refer to the specific category of children who have travelled outside their country of origin and are seeking asylum without their parents or guardians (Wernesjö 2012).

such, young refugees over sixteen find themselves in overwhelming situations where they must make all their applications and requests alone without any support. Often referred to as a “secondary trauma” (Fazel & Stein 2002: 367), the new period in URM lives entails adjusting to a set of often very unfamiliar social, cultural and legal expectations and represents a considerable challenge for their mental well-being. Those who are not refused entry or returned after having entered Germany are taken into care by the respective YWO (Jugendamt), the responsible state entity under German law, which places them in a variety of living arrangements, from institutional shelters, group homes, independent living (for older teenagers) or living with foster families (Hek 2005a; Parusel 2009).

The almost unanimously ratified UNCRC (UN General Assembly 1989) gives all children equal rights to have a childhood, to be treated fairly, to have safety, protection, education and to be heard. However, URM as a simultaneously vulnerable and resilient group have not always fully enjoyed their rights, especially those of protection and safety, and their voices are rarely heard. So, how do we know when a refugee child is doing well? Children are seldom asked about their experiences and even when so, their views are not given due respect. In fact, whilst there is a need to localize the power in refugee children and youth and find out how to use it to promote their resilience and subjective well-being, little is known about the ways in which this resilient and vulnerable population views their adapting process. The available evidence on refugee children’s perspectives on the “push and pull factors affecting their movement” (Bhabha 2014) is limited and underrepresented in the literature of importance to professionals in the field.

Understanding how refugee youth describes their successful coping and achieving well-being is crucial to enhance society’s understanding of their lived experiences and strengths to effectively support them in their negotiation and navigation towards resilience. But gaining such an understanding requires that research gives voice to these young people to express their concerns, needs, strengths, and hopes and gives these contributions to knowledge due respect (Lawrence, Kaplan & Dodds 2015). This study’s design is guided by the principle that the most fundamental respect we can show our children toward their autonomy and individuality. The literature review resulted in quite a few articles and reports that offered new insights on how these youths view their coping strategies to face an uncertain future (Forde 2007; Goodman 2004; Hek 2005a; Kanji & Cameron 2010; Lee 2012; Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010; Sleijpen, et al. 2013; Thomas & Byford 2003; Wernesjö 2012; Zeenatkhanu & Cameron 2010)<sup>3</sup>.

## REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Given the serious rise of unaccompanied child migration worldwide and the enormous trauma and loss that many of them experience, it is imperative for resilience schol-

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<sup>3</sup> The study was drawn up on the basis of this selected research and by means of consultations carried out with Prof. Dr. Manfred Liebel and Dr. Urszula Markowska-Manista within the MA *Childhood Studies and Children’s Rights* of Freie University Berlin.

ar research to not overlook their perspective on the experiences, their psychological distress as well as potential ameliorating factors in order to assist them to settle and regain a sense of normality within their new surroundings (Hek, 2005b). It should, however, be mindfully considered that, beyond the common denominator of having lost their home and parental support (Lawrence, Kaplan, & Collard 2016), URM's are not a homogenous group. They are diverse not only in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and religion but also in terms of their past experiences and present life situations (Wernesjö 2012).

There seems to be a frequent tendency among researchers to depict refugee youth as a particularly vulnerable group, emotionally and psychologically distressed, and 'at-risk' (Bean *et al.* 2007; Derluyn & Broekaert 2007; Hodes *et al.* 2008). Much of the relevant literature tends to concentrate on their vulnerability "as minors, as children separated from their parents and as refugees and asylum-seekers" (Wernesjö 2012: 496) focusing on emotional problems, trauma, and psychiatric symptoms. In a Belgian study (Derluyn & Broekaert 2007) between 37% and 47% of the URM's participants were found to have severe or very severe symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The research concludes that "being unaccompanied is an important risk factor for the emotional well-being of refugee children and adolescents" (p. 141).

Although the circumstances 1) in their native country, 2) in their journey and 3) in their integration process, greatly differ among the forcibly displaced children, research points to considerable evidence that refugee minors, being subject to the risk factors of forced displacement, separation and adjusting to a radically different society at a very formative stage of their development, are at significant risk of developing psychological disturbance (Fazel & Stein 2002). Studies researching the psychological implications of displacement for refugee children indicate a high frequency of emotional and behavioral problems but also physical and health problems (Fazel & Stein 2002). Strong continuity in adolescent' psychopathology has been also documented. A 12-month follow-up study (Bean *et al.* 2007) investigated the prevalence, course, predictors, and concordance of distress and behavioral problems among unaccompanied refugee minors living in the Netherlands. They found a chronic course of severe levels of traumatic stress reactions and internalized distress resulting in emotional distress and behavioral problems. They suggest that timely psychosocial interventions are applied among minors to monitor the symptoms of psychological problems. However, qualitative studies focusing on the emotional wellbeing of refugee children acknowledge that resilience exists in adversities (Forde 2007; Goodman 2004).

Studies investigating risk and resilience in URM's (Carlson, Cacciatore & Klimek 2012; Boyden & Mann 2005; Hodes *et al.* 2008) identify 5 central themes that render this population particularly vulnerable *loss, uprooting, separation, trauma, and resettlement* (Fazel & Stein, 2002). But despite the plethora of stress-related risk factors and the limited social support, not all the URM's experience the encountered adversities with the same intensity and to the same extent. Alternative approaches to the investigation of the life situation of refugee youth, give due to their inner resources and resilience when dealing with life challenges (Goodman 2004; Lee 2012). Adopting a resilience framework, Goodman's (2004) research explored how young Sudanese

refugees in the US cope with trauma and hardship. Its narrative approach highlighted four common themes as coping strategies: (a) collectivity and the communal self; (b) suppression and distraction; (c) meaning-making; and (d) emerging from hopelessness to hope. Goodman stresses the importance of considering the cultural aspects of strengths and trauma in URMs' lives rather than focus on their pathology.

Young refugees are often referred to as “a silent group that is easily overlooked” (Fazel & Stein 2002: 369). In terms of their needs and emotional and physical strengths – on which there is little research – the stories of the URMs have not been heard enough, nor has counseling literature fully addressed their views. In fact, research on resilience in URMs often lacks their unique perspective on their pathways to well-being which should be of primary importance for practitioners and policymakers as it provides invaluable insight to establish the best possible practices particularly around meeting their needs in the best way possible (Hek 2005a).

However, in the recent years, there has been growing research that fully credits refugee youth as active actors in their lives and future and where their present their own voices are presented and directly reported (Carlson, Cacciatore & Klimek 2012; Forde 2007; Goodman 2004; Lawrence, Kaplan & Collard 2016; Lee 2012; Malmsten 2014; Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010; Kanji & Cameron 2010). In their qualitative study, Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) investigated the active survival strategies of URMs in Ireland from a resilience perspective. They found that whilst many risk factors do exist, URMs are “agentive actors” who purposefully mobilize various coping strategies in their efforts to cope. They identified six coping strategies to foster resilience, with religion being the overarching protective factor.

## METHODOLOGY

Building on previous research this study explored the perceived strengths unaccompanied youth utilize in dealing with what they perceive as adversity and successfully cope with everyday life struggles. The children's views are compared to theories and related studies in an attempt to answer the question: *What in URMs' views are their strengths and resilience strategies that are beneficial in promoting their subjective well-being and bolster their positive development in the face of negative life events?*

Considering the researcher's philosophical<sup>4</sup> and epistemological stance, the qualitative phenomenological approach was found most suitable to explore resilience and subjective well-being as described by the 'actors' themselves (Sleijpen et al. 2013) which is useful in examining one single *phenomenon*<sup>5</sup> (Padilla 2003) or more phenomena from a plethora of perspectives and demographics (Creswell & Poth 2017). Its methods are effective in capturing and illuminating the lived experiences and percep-

<sup>4</sup> For instance, operating on the basis that “each person operates in terms of his own phenomenological field, his own interests, his own purposes” (Tenenbaum 1967: 343) which allows for a non-dogmatic attitude towards human experiential and behavioral phenomena and a genuine willingness to investigate in terms of what they mean to the individual's unique world.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek word *phenomenon* (φαινόμενον) derives from *phaenesthai* (φαίνεσθαι), to show itself, to appear.

tions of the individuals from their own perspectives empowering the participants to share their own views and make their silenced voices heard (Creswell 2007).

Data were collected by conducting individual, semi-structured, in-depth phenomenological interviews (Creswell 2007; Creswell & Poth 2017) asking broad, open-ended questions to facilitate obtaining rich, substantive subjective descriptions of *what* the participants experienced and *how* they experienced it (Moustakas 1994). They constitute the foundation of reflective structural analysis to identify what their narratives have in common in how the under-study phenomenon was experienced (Creswell 2007). For the data *explication*<sup>6</sup> process, a narrative approach was adopted to keep the essence of the children’s stories intact. Children’s informed consent for their participation—believed to “signal respect for their autonomy and human rights” (Graham et al. 2013: 57)—was handed out after verbally making explicit that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process.

The participants, two young boys of 17 years old at the time of the interview, were given fictive, common Arabic names to protect their anonymity and privacy. The following table gives a brief overlook of their demographics at the time of the interview.

Name	Sex	Current Age (years)	Age upon arrival (years)	Nationality	Countries lived prior to Germany	Civil Status	Language spoken	Address	Resident Permit
Abdul	Boy	17	14	Syria (born in Libya)	Libya, Syria	Unaccompanied Minor	Arabic, German	Apartment with other friends	No
Hamza	Boy	17	15	Syria	Syria	Unaccompanied Minor	Arabic, German, English	Apartment with other friends	No

Table 1: URMs sample demographics

The sample population was intentionally determined and kept homogeneous in an effort to minimize the diversity in the participants’ characteristics and facilitate the finding of common experiences (Creswell & Poth 2017) and increase the statistical reliability of the research findings. The principal selection criteria were that each research participant (a) was from an Arabic speaking country, (b) was a male, (c) entered Germany as an unaccompanied minor and was living separately from his family, (d) was able to articulate their experience (Hycner 1985: 294), i.e. had some command of either the German or the English language (e) was between the ages of 13 and 17 at the

<sup>6</sup> “Investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole” (Hycner 1985: 300).

time of the interview, (f) was willing to express feelings pertinent to the subject of the study and (g) permitted to audio record the interview. The size of the sample was defined by the participants' availability. Two more individuals between 15-17 years old expressed an interest in taking part in the study but did not fit the inclusion criteria because they had already been reunified and were living with their family.

As is customary in phenomenology, the researcher consciously bracketed her prior assumptions and preconceived ideas about the subject matter engaging in a self-reflecting process referred to as the *Epoché*<sup>7</sup> of the natural sciences (Husserl 1931; Moustakas 1994).

## DISCUSSION – KEY COPING MECHANISMS OF RESILIENCE

The children's descriptions were filled with bitter and sweet experiences<sup>8</sup>, negative and positive feelings, feelings of despair and hope, of anxiety and empowerment, feelings of loneliness and belonging. *So, how are they to be understood?* Consistent with findings from similar studies (Zeenatkhanu & Cameron 2010; Lee 2012) the major challenges to the children's subjective well-being can be categorized into four themes: *experiencing forced migration; stress and lack of sense of coherence; anxiety and significant loss of human and material resources, relationship conflicts (with professionals) resulting in perceived social rejection and exposure to cultural unawareness.*

As described by both, their relationship with the professionals presented various challenges and was at times a source of social strife precipitated by what they perceived as *cultural insensitivity*. Moreover, understood as *sensitivity* for their *individual learning pace* and being addressed to in a *friendly attitude*, particular prominence was given to the "respect" exhibited from their social workers as a necessary component in building the young boys' personal autonomy.

Anxiety and general distress ensue as a natural consequence of being separated from close important others but also as a consequence of social exclusion (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Keeping in mind that people experience rejection and acceptance in numerous ways, being *negatively impacted* by some professional's inconsiderately *articulated words*, the boys possibly perceived them as rejection or non-acceptance which can be accounted for having sparked off some conflicts and tightened some negative feelings. Feelings of rejection are argued to induce aggression and maladaptive behavior in children (Masten & Coatsworth 1998) and hinder their well-being whereas experiencing approval and acceptance is closely linked to reinforce resilience in children (Boyden & Mann 2005). Similar to other studies' findings, the refugee children identified social workers' and professionals' acceptance and friendly attitude as an important protective factor in helping them adjust to the new country (Hek 2005b; Zeenatkhanu & Cameron 2010). Both underlined that when feeling alone and vulnerable they were in need of social workers' positive approach and tolerance possibly

<sup>7</sup> Epoché is an ancient Greek term, which in its philosophical usage means "to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things" (Moustakas 1994: 33).

<sup>8</sup> Borrowed terms from "Social Acceptance and Rejection: The Sweet and the Bitter" (DeWall & Bushman 2011).

indicating that their psychological well-being was directly dependent on the positive stimuli received from their caregivers.

Children who experience trauma from going through serious adversity need an environment and attitudes that restore their sense of safety, control, and predictability. In fact, experiences of social inclusion seem to counteract negative feelings of social exclusion and stave off anxiety (Barden, Garber, Leiman, Ford & Masters 1985). Therefore, showing a genuine willingness to mindfully foster strong and healthy relationships between refugee children and their social workers should be a key strategy for intervention. Lastly, taking an active interest in these youth's countries of origin and the complexity of relevant cultural issues (Fazel & Stein 2002) would significantly improve communication on many levels and would augment practitioners' understanding of their worlds.

In furthering our understanding of the concept of resilience in unaccompanied refugee minors, it is crucial to not only grasp the consequences of the odyssey these young people are faced with but also to investigate what in their view are the strengths and strategies employed to promote their subjective wellbeing and to grow in the face of adversity. Both participants cited several strategies<sup>9</sup> as a way of dealing with life's uncertainty and coping with adversity; both inner and outer sources of strengths were highlighted. Self-reliance and positive emotions were seen as a common useful coping strategy in the context of emotional distress both linked to "the type of healthy functioning suggestive of the resilience trajectory" (Bonanno 2004).

### TREASURING PERSONAL IDENTITY

Treasuring one's own identity is argued to facilitate adaptation with other cultures by making meaning of the experiences (Zeenatkhanu & Cameron 2010; Stevens 2005). Several statements occurring during the interview show a link between individual and cultural identity development. Both adolescents had a somewhat fluid perspective of who they were and based their identity mainly on being part of their community of origin. Hamza, for example, had a clear idea of who he was which included his upbringing as an older brother, i.e. a mature and responsible individual who always reaches 'right decisions' by himself even if no adult is around to guide him. This way of upbringing, as he illustrates, had helped him overcome challenges and barriers in the immigration process.

**Hamza** *I believe the way my mother was with me when I was a kid has helped me through this important experience. ... I had to take care of such things myself regardless of my father or my mother was there or not... That has helped me so much, until now, too. Always make the right decision.*

After the two children left the asylum center and transitioned to independent living,

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<sup>9</sup> Coping strategies are understood here as the cognitive or behavioral reaction occurring in response to environmental demands and stress events that are perceived as exceeding an individual's resources or coping abilities (Baqtayan 2015).

no feelings of loneliness or being overwhelmed by the responsibilities were reported. The value of acquiring a sense of belonging to a group of peers was clearly articulated.

**Hamza** ... *I have not thought so much about my family or my friends because I found other people there (in the apartment he was sharing with other youths)... then we would always cook together, take walks together ... they were like me 15 years old.*

Reflecting on their sense of personal identity both boys included their family values. As it happens with minors at this age, in their transition to adulthood, refugee adolescents often experiment with risk-taking behaviors among others. Both children mentioned 'freedom' in the sense of being away from their family and community of origin as a risk factor that potentially leads to wrong life choices. They both distanced themselves from choices of paths of delinquency adhering to their family values.

**Abdul** *Some youngsters... because they are too young and weak they always want to have fun so to say... a great reason is that the family is not here and they can do whatever they want. ...they can do everything here in Germany, they have freedom. Because in Syria they had no freedom. They always had the father and the mother. Here in Germany, they are alone. I have not followed a bad path just because I am well-raised by my parents.*

### MAINTAINING CULTURAL IDENTITY

In their adaption process, refugee children often negotiate their identity between two fundamentally dissimilar cultures, that of their home countries and the receiving country's cultural norms (Markowska-Manista & Sawicki 2019). In Abdul's and Hamza's case, maintaining cultural identity as a mechanism for overcoming challenges refers more keenly to the motivation to preserve their culture of origin rather than to adapt to the host country's culture. Maintaining cultural identity includes characteristics of a culture that one wishes to preserve (Lee 2012) and the young boys seemed to be treasuring their culture by communicating in Arabic with their friends and keeping alive some of their traditional customs and norms. On the values embedded in his culture, Abdul says "... *with us* (meaning in his home country's culture) ... *we will be happy to help you. When we help someone, we do it gladly and we do not expect any help back.*" However, despite the fact that none of the boys displayed a clear concern about the level of their cultural adaptation, both their answers highlight German language acquisition as a priority for integration through further education noted in other researches as well (Ager & Strang 2008). In general, knowing more than one language is underlined as an asset by other studies of refugee children's experiences of resilience (Zeenatkhanu & Cameron 2010) as it facilitates understanding of the host country's culture and building of social networks as well as builds the children's confidence and self-esteem. In fact, both children described how the language barrier strongly influenced their ability to understand the complex set of rules and procedures in the center which often lead to stressful situations. The simple English Hamza spoke upon arrival in Germany clearly served as a protective factor as it facilitated interactions with the refugee shelter staff and strengthened his self-esteem. On the contrary, the absence

of this knowledge anything but eased Abdul's everyday hassle with life in Germany bringing tensions in his relationship with the social workers and deepened his general distress.

### NETWORKS OF SUPPORT AND SOCIAL NEGOTIATIONS

The literature points to the children's inner sources of strength and competencies but also to their interpersonal relationships as central factors in mediating resilience (Boyden & Mann 2005). Having strong ties to their families in Syria both children's narratives strongly pinpointed the extended family as a major protective mechanism in their striving to work through emerging daily difficulties. Both were determined to achieve subjective wellbeing, follow a "right path" in life and achieve their goals. Part of the strengths and ability to make positive life choices, they said, result from early teachings in their family. This is consistent with other studies that underscore the role of family support in enhancing resiliency in children (Bernard & Este 2005).

Furthermore, described as a person whom they can turn to and rely on, the existence of a *significant supportive and caring adult* was pinpointed as crucial in being a positive role model and setting examples of 'right' life choices. Various studies identify the presence of at least one close reliable relationship with competent, prosocial adults in the wider community, either during or after major stresses (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker 2000; Masten, Best & Garmezy 1990) to be an essential protective factor which nurtures resilience and strengthens children's capacity to do well in the face of significant adversity. On the contrary, the absence of strong healthy attachment with caring adults in the life of a child exposed to severe adversity has been related to maladaptive behavior (Masten & Coatsworth 1998).

Both children verbalized the cultural norm in their country which dictates that older children are involved in looking after their younger ones. Looking after young children, typically an adult task is regarded as part of a child's normal development towards adulthood (Liebel 2012). Abdul narrates about the strength and confidence derived from the interdependent relationship between him and his older brother after his traumatic experience with the driver who smuggled him from Italy into the wrong city in Germany.

*Abdul ... I called my brother, I told him I am in Berlin, but he did not find me. Then I sent him a photo and my brother said I was in Essen. But if I had not made a call to my brother, ... I could have done anything.*

*...When I first arrived in Germany I was 14 years old... My strength in this process was just my brother. I made it because he was there for me. ...he took good care of me and was a good example for me, he has shown me the good way. ...It was important to me that my brother was here. He supported me a lot.*

Relevant literature reports evidence that the quality of the relationships with caring adults has predictive significance for success in later developmental trajectories (Masten and Coatsworth 1998). This study's findings show that the presence of a sig-

nificant adult who acts as a mentor, a role model, provides emotional support and guidance can reduce the negative effects of migration-induced stress and promote self-confidence in children and effective coping mechanisms. In fact, the supportive relationship between Abdul and his brother which originates in the early teachings of caring for the younger siblings they learned alongside their parents (Liebel 2012) and the important alliance they have with each other account for of Abdul's obvious sense of coherence and emotional stability in the presence of such contextual life stress which likely has a positive influence on his general wellbeing.

A common variable in negotiating for social support was the *school* which played a significant role in overcoming challenges and barriers. Research indicates that when refugee children attend school, they gain a sense of stability and it has positive impact on their confidence, self-esteem, problem-solving abilities, and career opportunities (Hek 2005b) and the school environment is argued to contribute to resilience in children who have experienced adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker 2000). The children identified as advantages of going to school making friends, learning the German language and fulfilling aspirations for a brighter future.

Both narratives centered on *peer support* and *positive relationships* as being an indispensable mechanism for overcoming challenges as the young boys negotiated the difficult transition to life in Germany. In severe adversity, peer support can provide significant comfort also on the basis of shared experiences (Moore & Varela 2010). In fact, friendships and alliances with other youth who shared similar circumstances and had experienced similar difficulties were particularly stressed in both cases; also, a shared cultural background was important for both children. Apart from a few interactions with German peers, both boys appeared to not have overcome the cultural boundaries to create meaningful relationships with Germans.

**Abdul** *I have no German friends, only foreigners. I have had German friends, but it was bad with them. We just do not understand each other so well. We have diverse cultures.*

Thinking of resilience phenomenon as socially and culturally relevant (Rutter 1987) and also keeping in mind that it is best nurtured in situations of connection and collaboration (Walsh 2002) it can be argued that in both instances social activities with peers of the same cultural background effectively fostered the boys' social bonds and built their confidence thus likely having strengthened in them their overall ability to thrive in the face of adversity and develop toward success.

Although children's experiences with professionals differed noticeably, professional support was a lengthy discussed mechanism for overcoming challenges. Children named professional sources of social support in three categories: *social workers*, *youth service*, and *educational professionals*. Explicit examples of challenges in children's narratives stem from relationships with the *social workers* as they often interacted with the children on a firsthand basis. However, both boys acknowledged them to be a positive source of support in acquiring relevant to their life in Germany, independent living skills and achieving their life goals. Social workers' *genuine interest* and *the need*

*to be taken seriously and listened to* were stressed as vital for children's psychosocial wellbeing.

**Abdul** ... *when we had a water leak from the tap in the toilet they repaired it the same day because they did not want to have any problems with the neighbors, which is important for them. But my bed is not important for them that is why they needed a yearlong to fix it but is important to me and they do not understand it. Whenever they need something it goes fast but whenever we need something it goes slowly.*

However, both children appeared grateful for the services the German *Youth Welfare Office* provided for them upon and after their arrival and the *teachers* were mentioned as a valuable positive source of professional support with immediate effects whose empowering guidance and help children were significantly relying on.

**Abdul** *I made a presentation at school about Syrian refugees. My teachers corrected the text and I presented to my class how Syria was before the war and how after the war everything was destroyed...*

### NURTURING THE NEED TO BELONG

Recent neurobiology research suggests that social support, perceived as being cared for but also as belonging to a social network of mutual assistance and obligations, can provide a buffer against the negative effects of stress and trauma enhancing an individual's wellbeing (Seeman 1996). As depicted by their words, when children lacked a sense of coherence and perceived locus of control, their psychosocial distress increased; thus, pursuing a sense of belonging arose as a coping strategy. The need to belong, nearly universal amid human beings and cultures, is defined as the desire to form and maintain close, lasting relationships with other individuals (Baumeister & Leary 1995).

Having become separated from family and childhood friends, the young boys were motivated to develop entirely new social networks. Faced with this challenge and lacking close relationships with those around them they chose to form new interpersonal bonds and alliances which stimulated goal-directed actions to keep them close. Being in a home where they could feel comfortable was the first step; they also found a way to negotiate with the authorities to be settled in an apartment with their new friends from the refugee center. Their determination to create a new milieu to belong to by developing positive and lasting relationships eased coping with difficult present life circumstances and conveys a tremendous coping strategy towards wellbeing and resilience.

### EMBRACING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Corroborating with the findings of a study of URMs in Ireland (Ni Raghallaigh & Gilli-

gan 2010), one coping strategy described by the refugee children was that of embracing a positive outlook. Both children seemed to cope by looking forward in anticipation of a positive future and focusing on the positive aspects of their present situation. Their descriptions, situated within a comparative framework, assessed their present circumstances in contrast to what were perceived to be less favorable ones upon their arrival in Germany. In its essence, they made meaning out of their present life challenges by placing them in the context of early migration problems and future opportunities.

**Abdul** *There is a great difference in me between today and before. I mean, before I could not speak the language, now I can speak the language. ...last year I could not go out with friends but now I have a lot of friends and good friends... now I have an apartment, previously I had not... and... I feel better, much, much better than before. And before I was in a welcome class and so.... and there I didn't understand a thing (laughing), now I understand more.*

Savoring their positive achievements seemed to stave off feelings of hopelessness to hopefulness and empowerment (Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010) which facilitated a healthy way to cope with their present distress. The children often expressed optimism about creating a better future for themselves, through education or positive social orientation. Research has long proved the significance of positive emotions and hope for individuals who have endured trauma and loss (Goodman 2004). Their usefulness lies in that they reduce levels of distress following adverse events both by “quieting or undoing negative emotion” (Bonanno 2004: 26). Hoping and planning for the future became central in the boys’ daily struggle and helped them endure the hardship of migration. The importance of this coping strategy lies in the fact that being optimistic, believing in one’s own competencies to master difficult situations, and staying persistent are likely to mobilize greater effort and have been shown to be related to subjective well-being and good health (Bandura 1977).

### PERCEIVED SELF-EFFICACY AND PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

A child’s dispositional attributes play a significant role in cultivating resilience (Rutter 1987). *Intelligent thought*, generally recognized as an important adaptive trait among human beings (Baumeister & Leary 1995) paired with an *easy, adaptable sociable temperament* are the two most identified individual characteristics used to explain a child’s resilience (Rutter 1987; Werner 1989). Both children identified personal attributes they had before experiencing forced migration like assertiveness and self-reliance which made the challenges faced in Germany manageable.

**Hamza** *I always think myself of what I should do. ...I already knew I was alone in Macedonia or Greece. I had to make the right decision... alone.*

**Abdul** *...I have always thought that to get whatever I wanted I always had to do*

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*something for it. ... I have always wanted to have the best and I've had it.*

In contrast with other studies (Lee 2012) managing their daily living was anything but a problem for the two 14-year-old boys. Pre-migration experiences had formed their ability to deal with their lives ably which proved to be useful in their current life context. Also, when solutions to different life problems emerged, they were quickly adopted and applied to relevant situations; like when they wrote formal complaints to the YWO about the conditions in their camp and used this opportunity to be accommodated with their chosen friends. The ability to spot out opportunities to negotiate their living conditions is indicative of children's capability of lateral thinking, problem-solving skills and active engagement in assuming some control over their life. This inner resourcefulness in children is argued to enhance to a significant extent the strategies that they use to cope with stressful situations (Boyden & Mann 2005).

Interviews with the adolescents showed that they were quite independent individuals and had a well-established feeling of their worth. Both had expectations related to who they were in the past and who they aimed to be in the future. Thus, both were certain of their ability to endure the arduous journey and surmount all the adversities in the adapting process. Self-efficacy<sup>10</sup> expectation as a mechanism of operation is argued to be a major determinant of an individual's coping efforts in the face of obstacles and aversive events. It also influences the time length they will sustain the active effort in dealing with stressful situations (Bandura 1977). Dealing with a fundamentally altered conception of themselves in relation to others in their shared world the young boys chose to adopt a confident self-perception which proved to be a significant protective factor (Rutter 1987) empowering them to reassert some control in their present uncertainty, a coping strategy identified also by other researchers in refugee children (Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010).

#### *Adopting a growth mindset & self-enhancement expectation*

Bonanno (2004) argues that, when challenging life events pose threats to the self, an unexpected pathway to resilience is linked to self-enhancement. Self-enhancement is seen as another dimension of resilient functioning and is associated with high self-esteem, adaptive behavior and being socially active (Bonanno 2004). The young boys' tendency for self-enhancement was expressed as they embraced a growth mindset about their capabilities keeping their future goals attainable and adjusting them to benefit the most from their new reality.

**Hamza** ... *I wanted to be a lawyer when I was in Syria because the Arabic language is so easy for me. But when I came to Germany, I thought about it again, and I already knew that it's not simple for me to become one.*

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<sup>10</sup> Perceived self-efficacy has been defined as the belief in one's own competence and personal ability to exercise control and execute actions to produce effects required to manage life situations (Bandura 2001).

Although several factors constrained the opportunities to achieve their life goals, both boys seemed to be engaging in a self-regulation process to accept the situation and refocus on the present and the future. A growing body of research on self-regulation and adaptive human behavior (Wrosch et al. 2003) demonstrates that persistent pursuit of personal goals is as important as the capacity to disengage from specific unattainable goals, both having beneficial effects on subjective well-being. Moreover, perceiving favorable opportunities for future development and being able to reengage in new goals is a significant predictor of subjective wellbeing and a protective factor that may assist individuals in managing unattainable goals (Wrosch et al. 2003). This aspect here reveals that the construction of resilience is more linked to the idea of “bouncing forward” from adversity in the face of an uncertain future (Walsh 2002) rather than to the concept of “bouncing back” to impossible pre-displacement normality.

### REFLECTIONS

The present study is an addition to a slowly growing corpus of work on refugee children’s resilience, wellbeing and mental health (Fazel & Stein 2002; Forde 2007; Zeenatkhanu & Cameron 2010; Lee 2012; Wernesjö 2012). Its conclusions do not “suggest a finality and surety which is not defensible” (Lester 1999: 3) rather they intend to advance our understanding by looking into an understudied aspect of refugee minors’ resilience. With a small sample even for qualitative research, the study’s findings are useful in elucidating the refugee children’s perception of their resilience and sparking further better-informed research questions. However, it comes with inevitable limitations whose consequences should be recognized so that its results are not overstated. Conducted in a specific target population, the present small-scale study provides qualitative data whose generalizability to other groups is up to the reader’s discretion. Following Hycner’s (1985) syllogism, from a strictly empirical perspective, the results of any qualitative study can only apply to its target population, therefore, they cannot be generalizable. However, if the process of exploring the meaning that these adolescents make of their displacement and resettlement experiences, can illuminate to a considerable extent our understanding of their unique perspectives of resilience, then this knowledge is valuable in generating hypotheses (Herrman et al. 2011) about resilience phenomenon in human experience thus it can be informative for the human beings in general and potentially generalizable to resilience theoretical framework. Although the phenomenological approach allowed for surfacing of some deep individual experiences, phenomenological studies are often complex and require a lot of time (Padilla-Diaz 2015) therefore, implications for further research include the need for a longitudinal study design to scrutinize resilience phenomenon in unaccompanied minor refugees with the necessary depth. Hunter et al. (2002) stress the vitalness of viewing the data from several perspectives, through multidimensional thinking and by employing creativity and varied strategies to make meaning of the interviews’ content. Therefore, a more collaborative approach to the qualitative data explication

would increase the likelihood of gaining a creative and insightful perspective on the research phenomenon (Dierckx de Casterle, Gastmans, Bryon & Denier 2012).

## CONCLUSION

To the unsettling effects of being uprooted from their birth countries and torn from their milieu, having their lives disrupted because they had no other choice and feared for their own life, the two boys fled their homeland and underwent a dangerous journey, navigating through an unknown world in seek of safer and better lives; there was no certainty that what awaited them would be easy. And while the memories of their perilous adventure had not yet faded in their minds, both had to go through the ordeal of dealing with complex legal immigration processes as well as having to rapidly adapt to changing societal, cultural and linguistic conditions. This kind of hardship poses serious threats to the psychological, social and physical health of young refugees. However, despite the existence of such acute risk factors the two adolescents talked about adaptive functioning and engaging in coping processes both indicative of their individual pathway toward resilience.

By giving space to children to voice their strengths and outline their resilience strategies, this study's findings confirm those of other researches (Forde 2007; Goodman 2004; Kanji & Cameron 2010; Lee 2012; Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010; Zeenat-khanu & Cameron 2010) that these young individuals with a remarkable psychological strength are active agents in choosing meaningful pathways to resilience and recalibrating their lives towards a new normality. They prove to be capable, resilient individuals, resourceful in coping strategies, survival mechanisms and abilities to orientate and adapt within an unknown synthesis of rules, customs and culture (Lee 2012; Forde 2007). Their employed strengths and coping mechanisms to respond to stress and adversity in their life are of course contextual, culturally-based (Goodman 2004) and should be perceived as "both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and ...the capacity to negotiate for, health resources on their own terms" (Ungar 2008: 225).

Possessing attributes such as self-reliance, perseverance, positivity, and goal-orientation the two adolescents appeared to actively sustain their own motivation and behavior toward their intended future growth within a network of reciprocally interacting influences. The identified coping strategies which both URM's developed as they overcame new and ongoing challenges are only indicative. The examples demonstrate the importance and value of their lived experience as they relate to their pathway to well-being. However, URM's, as a vulnerable and resilient population, sustain their wellbeing in quite different ways which reflects the access they have to available resources from which they can elicit strength and mobilize them depending on their judgment of the circumstances (Ungar 2005). Most of the strategies highlighted may sound perhaps a bit commonsensical but that does not mean they are less valid or vital. Drawing on Stevens' (2005) observations, the range of strengths, behaviors, and actions when dealing with, perceived and actual, migration-induced threats to their

wellbeing were the following:

- *Maintain positive and lasting interpersonal bonds* and form new strong attachments to friends and peers' structures that serve as havens for treasuring one's own identity.
- Seek experiences to *treasure their own cultural identity* and exploration of a new cultural identity.
- Have a strong *perceived self-efficacy and self-enhancement expectations* for social mobility to "make it and improve one's self".
- *Appraise their family context* for the ability of self-enhancement and self-efficacy.
- *Embrace a positive outlook* and demonstrate a high sense of their own competence and positive self-perception.
- Distance themselves from deviant life paths and *select appropriate role models* to develop attainable, new, future-directed goals and aspirations within their new surroundings.
- *Elicit social support* and demonstrate efforts in *negotiating* changes in environmental situations to regulate and facilitate more positive and strong social network affiliations.
- Manifest a capacity in *assessing the quality of their social relationships* and the behavior of others.
- Accept their situation and *assume responsibility* for their present and future well-being.

Phenomenological studies are complex and require a lot of time (Padilla-Díaz 2015). The structure of the children's narratives may be characterized by sparse attention to detail which could be a result of participants' uneasiness to share a considerable amount of information in such a brief time with the researcher, a stranger. Therefore, implications for further research include the need for a longitudinal study design to scrutinize the studied phenomenon of this research with the necessary depth.

Further research is needed to reach a better understanding of the construct of resilience in young refugees. This study's vision on paths for future research aligns with the observation that resilience research should not disregard the fact that resilience and achievement of wellbeing come both with benefits and risks. It is clear that in order to investigate resilience in URM's researchers should move beyond a narrow focus on one cause or a small group of causes (Herrman et al. 2011). Competence in one domain does not necessarily guarantee competence in another. Therefore, one of the most intriguing and controversial questions to be added to the growing body of research on URM's resilience would be whether these children *are* or *will* be paying a price for "struggling well" (Walsh 2002) with such severe adversity in terms of present and/or future psychological distress.

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