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EDITORIAL

The State of the Universe and the Union: A Look Back in Anguish on Last Week through a Migratory Burning Glass[1]

Ralf Roßkopf[2]

Thursday, 18 June 2023:

After years of debate, the Council of the European Union reaches an agreement on key elements of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Council outlines its positions for two new Regulations on Asylum Procedure and Migration Management (Council of the European Union, 2023a, 2023b). The first targets streamlined and accelerated procedures. Border procedures of up to 12-16 weeks (eventually to be continued) shall become mandatory following e.g., an application made at an external border crossing point or in a transit zone; apprehension in connection with an unauthorized crossing of the external border; disembarkation in the territory of a Member State after a search and rescue operation; or a relocation transfer.

> "Member States should assess applications in a border procedure where the applicant is a danger to national security or public order, where the applicant has misled the authorities by presenting false information or documents or by withholding relevant information or documents with respect to his or her identity or nationality that could have had a negative impact on the decision and where it is likely that the application is unfounded because the applicant is of a nationality for whom the proportion of decisions granting international protection is lower than 20% of the total number of decisions for that third country. In other cases, such as when the applicant is from a safe country of origin or a safe third country, the use of the border procedure should be optional for the Member States" (Art. 40b of the Proposal for an Asylum Procedure Regulation).

Regular capacities should meet 30,000 on the Union level, distributed to the border States. Their obligation to the border procedure is generally limited by that cap at a time and four times as much in a year. A minimum of 30,000 annual relocations is introduced, each one fixed at €20,000 with responsibility offsets for those offering relocation. Mandatory distribution along fixed quotes could not be achieved. With Dublin-III criteria basically incorporated into the proposal for the Migration Management Regulation the burden remains on the southern and eastern Members States with a potential of seeking relief on the backs of the migrants (deterrence, abuse, inhumane reception conditions, insufficient procedures) or by neglecting obligations. Widened scopes for safe country of origin and safe third country mechanisms combined with accelerated asylum and return procedures will shift the burden to neighboring third countries.

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Sunday, 11 June 2023

In conclusion of a visit of the President of the EU Commission von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Rutte to Tunisian President Saied, a joint press statement is titled "check by delivery". Framed by initiatives on economic development, investment and trade, energy migration, in 2023,

> "the EU will provide EUR 100 million to Tunisia for border management, but also search and rescue, anti-smuggling and return. The objective is to support a holistic migration policy rooted in the respect of human rights" (EU Commission, 2023).

At the same time, the EU will

> "create a Tunisia window in the Erasmus+ programme worth EUR 10 million to support student exchange. And we will establish 'Talent Partnerships' to give Tunisia's youth opportunities to study, work or train in the EU. They will develop new skills useful for modernising Tunisia's economy" (EU Commission, 2023).

Tuesday, 20 June 2023

In sharp contrast, UNHCR celebrates the strength and courage of those forcefully displaced on the 2023 World Refugee Day under the theme of "Hope away from home – A world where refugees are always included." As if to challenge ones ambiguity tolerance even further, on the very day, UNHCR's Global Trends report announces a new all-time record high of 108.4 Million forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2022, among them, 35.3 million refugees, 62.5 million internally displaced people, 5.4 million asylum seekers, and 5.2 million other people in need of international protection. 76% of those were hosted in low- and middle-income countries. 52 percent of all refugees and other people in need of international protection came from the Syrian Arab Republic (6.5 million), Ukraine (5.7 million) and Afghanistan (5.7 million).

Wednesday, 21 June 2023

An overcrowded fishing boat with up to 750 migrants, including as many as 100 children, on board sank with the Greek coast guard close by. Up to 600 humans died. The 104 rescued were only male (Beake & Wright, 2023).

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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Supporting Decision-making Processes of Syrian Refugees: Empirical Research on Expectations and Prospects 'on the Move'[1]

Florian Blauth[2]

Abstract

In recent years, forced migration[3] *has increased significantly and become an important topic in migration research and policy making. Despite this influx and policy changes, refugees' voices are rarely heard at any stage of flight. In social work, either humanitarian aid in transit countries or challenges at the destination are considered. This study bridges the gap and analyses refugees' decision-making from a retrospective view. The project focused on the following research question: Which factors influence decision-making of Syrian refugees in the context of forced migration and flight? The question was approached by applying a constructivist approach in which deductive-inductive qualitative research methods were used. A literature review was conducted on migration models that explain individuals' reasoning and on factors that explain Syrian refugees' decision-making. In addition, qualitative data was gathered in six problem-centred interviews. Four Syrian refugees who have reached Germany and two experts in social work from Jordan and Lebanon were interviewed. A qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2000) was used to develop categories that describe influencing factors. The analysis generated two categories of factors that influence Syrian refugees' decision-making: 1) structural factors and 2) individual factors. The first category comprised of four sub-categories: situation in Syria, situation in transit countries, situation in Germany, and obstacles and dynamics. Individual factors were divided into six influencing factors: expectations, prioritisation of needs, received support, agency of refugees, information, and trustworthiness. Furthermore, the decision-making process of Syrian refugees has been visualised. In addition to these two categories that influenced decision-making, the actual decision taking of Syrian refugees was analysed. The findings emphasise the dynamic and*

 It is based on the Master thesis with the same titled, accepted by today's Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt, on 13/12/2021, and supervised by Prof. Dr. Ralf Roßkopf.

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[3] A clear distinction between voluntary migration and forced migration is often difficult. Instead of applying a binary approach, it seems to be more appropriate to understand migration decisions on a continuum. Hugo et al. describe the following persons being subject to forced migration: "refugees, those internally displaced for reasons given in refugee law, people displaced by development projects, environmental migrants, and victims of natural disasters and man-made accidents" (2018: 25).

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processual character of decision-making. Additional factors that are considered by individuals were able to be determined, and social work specific themes were considered. The findings of this study suggest that social workers may offer valuable support to Syrian refugees and help them to make informed choices.

Key words:

Decision-making process, informed decision, Syrian refugee, structural and individual factors, social work

1 Introduction

Recent migration research has expanded significantly and developed an advanced understanding of wider social, economic, and political relationships. New research methods are being implemented and a diverse understanding of sending and receiving countries as well as structural considerations and individual agency is emerging (Napierała et al., 2022; Vargas-Silva, 2012; Williams & Graham, 2014). This article describes a retrospective research project on decision-making processes of Syrian refugees who fled Syria and came to Germany. The research aims to gain insight into refugees' reasoning 'on the move' and to emphasise individual perspectives at different stages of flight. The research is conducted from a social work perspective and elaborates on refugees' reasoning as legal pathways to humanitarian access in Europe as the 'safe haven' are pending. Even before the influx of refugees from Syria increased, Crawley (2010) pointed out that policy making should be based on evidence rather than on assumptions about the reasons why refugees 'choose' to reach a certain destination country. As a profession and discipline, social work focuses on empowerment and liberation of people. Therefore, it promotes decision-making capacity and "engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing" (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). A sound understanding of refugees' perspectives and individual decision-making processes is required to develop customised interventions and to be able to advocate for human rights and frame legal considerations.

2 Forced Migration and Decision-making Processes of Syrian Refugees

Refugee and forced migration studies have grown to become a global research field and are considered in humanities, social, and political sciences (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014: 2-3; Hugo et al., 2018: 24). In this research project, individual decision-making processes are investigated. Therefore, primarily theories that analyse migration on the micro-level or meso-level are considered. Despite some prejudices that most asylum seekers "are actually 'economic migrants', there is clear evidence that conflict is the single most significant factor associated with most flows of asylum seekers to the countries of Europe" (Crawley, 2010: 20). Choices of refugees relate to economic, political, social, and structural factors. On the one hand, decisions are characterised by possibilities to choose, the will of the person and time for preparation. On the other hand, life threatening pressures force people to migrate instantly, for example for political reasons (Bartram et al., 2014; Hugo et al., 2018; Schuster, 2016).

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Lee's push and pull model (1966) is one of the commonly used models to explain migration processes, and it is the first to explain movements of people within the push and pull framework on the micro-level (Hagen-Zanker, 2008: 9). This model has been developed in response to Ravenstein's "The Laws of Migration" (1885). The functionalist push and pull model is often consulted in research on decision-making processes in asylum-related migration (Alhanaee & Csala, 2015; Crawley, 2010; European Asylum Support Office et al., 2017). These factors are not only considered in research but also in asylum-related discourse and policy making processes (Crawley, 2010: 4). The influencing factors may help to understand decision-making processes and highlight aspects for possible interventions by social workers. On the other hand, the Kinetic Model, developed by Kunz (1973), pledges to analyse the decision-making of refugees based on the individual's reasoning.

In current research, static models are extended by further variables. Robinson and Segrott (2002) use a more differentiated model of asylum seekers' decision-making that includes different stages of flight, influences on decisions, and decisions themselves. Haug (2008) developed a multilevel model that links decisions on the macro-, meso- and micro-level and acknowledges the complexity of decision-making processes and the impact of migration networks. Brekke and Aarset (2009) criticise the multilevel model as it neglects the factor of time and interprets asylum-related migration within linear stages. Decision-making is rather described as a process that includes multiple decisions and the evaluation of information. Furthermore, their research highlights the importance of networks of asylum seekers, counterflows of information, the sequential character of flight movements, as well as possible changes in dynamics during migration and over time. Koser and Kuschminder (2016) introduce a decision-making model that focuses on the situation in transit countries and distinguishes influencing factors on three levels. Structural factors, individual factors, and policy interventions are described. Furthermore, the study questions the traditional interpretation of forced migration: "As more and more migrants are moving through transit countries, the traditional origin-destination country dichotomy in migration needs to be expanded to include transit countries" (p. 22). Finally, Hugo et al. (2018) describe that forced migration tends to result in wavelike settlement movements which are caused by certain events or groups of people. Corridors, routes, or networks can be established and allow other people to migrate as well.

Research conducted before the start of the war in Syria already considers decision-making processes of asylum seekers to a certain extent (Crawley, 2010). The review of research studies suggests that research on Syrian refugees' decision-making processes has developed quickly after the war had started (Alhanaee & Csala, 2015; Danish Refugee Council [DRC], 2016; European Asylum Support Office et al., 2017; The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016). Research studies are characterised by high diversity and vary in their reliability, their sample size, and their findings. It is important to highlight that migration routes to Europe are difficult to predict as they are constantly changing and unfolding in various ways. Migration takes place in different stages and "migrants may not always know their next step and may assess their options based on information and resources that are continually being received and weighed" (Kuschminder et al., 2015: 66). Asylum seekers flee at short notice from direct persecution and have little chance to plan routes and possible destinations. Resources, such as identity documents and financial means, may be limited and, thus, influence the ability to overcome distance and choose routes. Some countries may be accessible whilst

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others remain unreachable because of entry regulations and transport routes (Robinson & Segrott, 2002: 2-5). Despite these possible restrictions, a certain amount of agency and control on one's life is given even in difficult situations of flight and persecution (Robinson & Segrott, 2002: 5; Triandafyllidou, 2015: 18). Finally, it should be noted that refugees are not a homogeneous group in several regards (DRC, 2016: 10). In the literature review, eight factors that influence decision-making could be derived, namely 'Expectations', 'Prospects, risks, and decisions on locality', 'Prioritisation and influence of factors', 'Resources', Information channels', 'Trustworthiness', 'Situation in transit country', and 'Prolonged refugee situation'.

Expectations towards life in the destination country, such as anticipated level of freedom and possibilities for individual development, have a high impact on decisions (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017: 184-185). Respect and dignity, peace and safety, and lower housing and health care costs are widely expected when living in Europe. Further aspects concern "Language classes; More job opportunities, if not guaranteed employment; Access to health care and medical treatment; Government provided accommodation; Educational opportunities; Human rights and dignity; Large sums of cash on a weekly basis" (DRC, 2016: 3). These expectations might be idealised, but fears and doubts regarding life in Europe exist as well. Syrians express reservation about the influence of culture in Europe, their ability to cope with cultural differences or their ability to acquire language skills (DRC, 2016: 3, 32; UNHCR, 2017: 12).

The findings of the DRC (2016) suggest that prospects in the destination country, as well as tragedies on the move, have a direct impact on decision-making in favour of, or against, onward movement. Participants in transit countries who receive information about the success of peers in the destination country desire to follow them directly whereas participants who are informed about deaths or disappearances of community members are deterred.

The following patterns in priorities of Syrian refugees who fled to Turkey have been detected: "1. Safety, family unification; 2. Survival and meeting basic needs; 3. Better employment, and schooling for children; 4. Building respect or engagement with the community; and 5. Support to other refugees" (Bellamy et al., 2017: 9). Kuschminder et al. (2015) suggest that three main factors determine the destination of so-called irregular migrants. First, available resources are an influencing factor. Second, traffickers' and smugglers' abilities and skills have a determining influence. Finally, experiences made in transit countries have an influence on the choice of destination. In the case of Syrian refugees, the impact of smugglers on the decision-making process has been questioned by other findings (DRC, 2016: 10; UNHCR, 2017: 27).

Resources prove to be another important factor within decision-making. Class, education-level, and socio-economic status influence migration duration that may be prolonged if resources that facilitate onward movement are missing (Kuschminder et al., 2015: 67). "Contact with family and friends has a significant additional impact on the migrants' ability to continue towards the preferred destination" (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017: 185). Financial support at certain stages of flight is especially important. Refugees having no access to such resources may be caught in transit (185-186). Coping mechanisms to finance onward movement include selling personal items or properties in Syria (DRC, 2016: 6). Nowadays, smartphones have become an important resource as they enable

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refugees to access information that is necessary to develop migration strategies (Gillespie et al., 2016: 9).

Transmission of information about migration routes and prospects in the destination country by relatives or friends is a crucial channel for refugees in transit countries to gain information and to develop future plans (DRC, 2016: 4; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017: 185). The digital infrastructure which provides access to information and usage of smart phones has become as vital as other infrastructures for refugees on the move (Dekker et al., 2018: 2). Searching for information is rather described as being a group effort. Once gained, the information is shared directly with others (4-5). Online media provides sources that enable migrants to retain social ties and to share information and has become increasingly important (DRC, 2016; Dekker et al., 2018; Dekker et al., 2015; UNHCR, 2017; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). Despite this support, Syrian refugees are confronted with ambiguous advice and often have varying levels of knowledge (Kuschminder et al., 2015: 69). UNHCR documents that trusted and reliable information from official bodies in Arabic is not accessible for Syrian refugees on the move and the intricacies of asylum-procedures in Europe is unclear (UNHCR 2017: 10, 31).

> "Stemming from a tradition of oral communication and a culture of trusting "one's own", Arabic speakers usually do not seek information from institutional websites, media or smugglers. Instead they tend to rely on fellow countrymen, who have already made the journey and shared their experiences" (UNHCR, 2017: 27).

Family members and friends are mostly seen as trustworthy, as they become part of the migration network. Therefore, the evaluation on the reliability of the content of the information depends on the recipient's relation to the information source. In current refugee movements, the validation of social media information becomes predominant (Dekker et al., 2018: 9). Media becomes important as well but is selected more carefully. Official sources often provide information that is too complex, requires previous knowledge or support from others and is not mobile friendly (UNHCR, 2017; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017: 176). People attempt to compensate lack of knowledge by asking others or sharing information. Unfortunately, it seems that this information is mostly fragmentary, false or based on assumptions. After arriving in the destination country, the adjustment to life in Europe was perceived as more difficult than anticipated and the challenges were greater than expected (UNHCR, 2017: 11, 31, 45).

Research shows that factors in transit countries influence the decision-making of Syrian refugees. The deterioration in quality of asylum is one reason for secondary flight movement towards Europe (DRC, 2016: 7). Furthermore, hopelessness, high costs of living, ongoing poverty, and limited access to employment and education are factors forcing refugees from Syria to leave neighbouring countries (European Commission, 2016: 2). Discrimination in transit countries and competition for housing, education, and labour are named as other factors that may cause onwards movement (Schuster, 2016: 297). Whilst local health care access is perceived to be declining and is often not trusted, untreated health conditions sometimes push individuals to take on the journey to Europe (DRC, 2016: 6; UNHCR, 2015).

Seven reasons for onward movement to Europe that are resulting from the prolonged refugee situation can be named: loss of hope, high costs of living and deepening poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, shortfall of aid, hurdles to renew legal residency, scant education opportunities, and feeling unsafe in the transit country (UNHCR, 2015). After

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several years of ongoing war in Syria, the situation has become more serious for refugees who are living in transit countries in the Middle East. Most refugees in these countries hope for a safe return to Syria. "However, the overall intention to return in the short term remained extremely low despite some 90 per cent of Syrian refugees interviewed said they and their families were unable to meet their basic needs in host countries" (UNHCR, 2022: 10).

3 Research Objective

The main objective of this research project is to understand decision-making of Syrian refugees during different flight stages and to gain insight into their perspectives. It aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of flight experiences from a social work perspective. Research on expectations and prospects of Syrian refugees in Germany may help social workers to respond to refugees' needs and to choose appropriate methods of support. The empiric research focuses on the following research question: Which factors influence decision-making of Syrian refugees in the context of forced migration and flight?

Decision-making is a process that includes multiple decisions at different locations and points in time. Therefore, decision-making will be considered in its processual character. This research study pledges for an approach that acknowledges individuals' previous experiences during flight and links these experiences with present expectations and prospects in the destination country. The retrospective views of refugees and the additional considerations of the experts may help to provide new insights into the decision-making process, to reveal decision-making capacity, and to highlight possibilities for refugees to make informed choices. These individual perspectives from persons who were forced to leave their origin countries may add to other models that focus solely on rational choices.

4 Method

In this article, experiences and individual explanations, as well as construction of realities of Syrian refugees who already fled to Germany, are analysed. The retrospective research project follows a social constructivist approach in accordance with Robson (2011: 24-25). Refugees' experiences are in the focus as the research tries to examine how individuals explain and construct their realities. This approach allows freedom regarding the order of questions and gives flexibility regarding the attention and amount of time spent on each topic. In circumstances where interviewees might have experienced trauma or severe threats in the context of flight and forced migration, non-directive or unstructured interviews might be less favourable. Some research studies concerning the decision-making process of Syrian refugees have already been conducted. Therefore, a semi-structured approach to combine existing knowledge and ascertainable knowledge in a discursive and dialogical procedure is used as suggested by Gahleitner (2005c). The research question is approached by conducting a literature review (Part I) and a qualitative research study (Part II). Results of the literature review were used for formulating guiding questions and developing categories for data analysis. A flow-chart illustrating the research design is provided in Figure 1:

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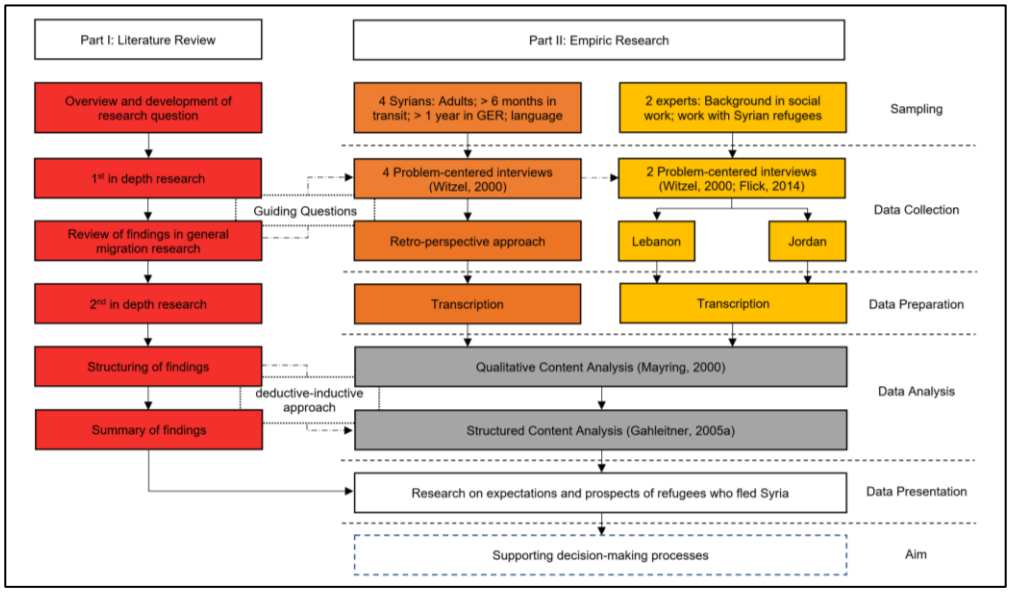
Figure 1: Research Design



Data for this research project was gathered in July and August 2018. Two expert interviews (Flick, 2014) were held with experts from Jordan and Lebanon. The interviews with four Syrian refugees constitute the main data source for this research project. Interviewing refugees about their flight experience is difficult because sensitive topics may be addressed. In circumstances where interviewees might have experienced trauma or severe threats in the context of flight and forced migration, non-directive or unstructured interviews might be less favourable. Therefore, problem-centred interviews [PCIs] were chosen for data gathering. In contrast to narrative interviews that may comprise of a higher risk for triggering stressful emotions (Gahleitner, 2005b: 113), this structured approach allows the interviewer to intervene directly. Additional time for an evaluation of and a reflection on the interview was assigned. All interviewees gave informed written consent, were given contact details of the interviewer and an additional meeting if there was any need for further reflections. No remuneration was given to any interviewee in this research project.

4.1 Problem-centred Interviews

Data for the empirical research is gathered in six PCIs and aims to generate theories (Witzel, 2000). One of the main contributions of this method is that it overcomes the suspected reciprocity of theory driven approaches and open-minded approaches. This flexible approach has two main possible pitfalls. On one hand, the researcher may simply adapt the interviewee's perspective of the problem. On the other hand, the theory may be imposed on the collected data. The three basic principles to prevent these pitfalls, namely problem-centred orientation, object-orientation, and process-orientation (Witzel, 2000, paras. 3-4), have been implemented.

Interview guidelines were used to structure the interviews. They allow the interviewer to keep some control whilst the interviewee can express subjective views and feelings

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(Gahleitner, 2005c: 45-48). The questions were derived from the findings of the literature review and allowed the interviewees to express their individual thoughts and experiences. Additional questions that helped interviewees to introduce new aspects were integrated. The interview guideline was peer-reviewed by a social science PhD student and checked by the first examiner of the master's thesis. Afterwards, the interview guideline was tested in an interview with a fellow master's social work student and changed slightly once more. Finally, the interview guideline was adapted for the expert interviews. Below, the interview guideline for the refugees in English is presented in table 1:

Table 1: Interview Guideline

I. Introduction	
As you know, I am looking for people who fled Syria and are willing to share their experiences. Experiences about their expectations towards Europe. Experiences of making decisions on the flight. You are the expert, you made your way to Germany and had to make decisions on your way. Your experiences may help others who are thinking to go to Europe or who are on the way to make informed decisions. You can help other people, families, or supporters to find and to give information. I will need to record the interview so that I can write it down and use it for my master's thesis. Only I will have access to the recording itself. Once written down, it will be printed at the end of the thesis. All your personal data will be handled confidentially. I will change your name and any other names of people as well as places that may allow conclusions regarding your identity. (Handing out "I. Consent Form"). In the beginning, I would like to highlight something important: First, don't worry about the language or any language-mistakes you or I make. Second, in this interview I am interested in your personal view, so whatever you think or say is right. I am really interested in your individual experiences, how you made decisions, and how you experienced things. I will not ask a set of questions. Rather, I ask you to talk about the different topics as much as you want, and think is important. I will take some notes during the interview and will only ask questions if I did not understand something or if I am interested in something in more depth. Only at the end of the interview I will ask some more specific questions. Overall, the interview may take about 45 to 60 minutes. If you agree to do the interview this way, I would like to start.	
II. Starting question	
I am interested in your personal expectations about Europe and Germany and the decisions you made in the last years: What decisions have you made on your way from Syria to Germany and how did it come that you made these decisions? You can start with whatever comes to your mind first.	
1. Life situation	
Life situation in country of origin:	Can you tell me more about your life in Syria before the war, please? What do you think was good and what was not so good?
Life situation in transit country:	What country were you living or travelling in, before you came to Germany? Tell me about your life there. How was it to live in country X?
Life situation in Germany:	How do you see your life today in Germany? What aspects of living in Germany do you like the most? What are your greatest challenges living in Germany? Please, can you tell me about any positive surprises or disappointments? What would you tell others from Syria about your life in Germany?
2. Expectations	
Expectations Syria/area of origin:	Please, tell me something about the picture of Europe you had, when you lived in Syria. If you look back in your life: How did you think life in Germany would be?
Expectations transit country:	Have you ever considered to spend time in country X before? What did you hear about Germany/Europe when you were there?
Expectations about Europe/Germany:	What were your expectations of living in Germany before you came here? How did you expect life to be in Europe/Germany?

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Development of expectations:	What expectations about Europe were not fulfilled? How were your expectations met? How did your expectations develop? Which expectations changed, and which stayed the same?
3. Prospects	
Prospects in Syria/area of origin:	What were your plans before the war in Syria started? What did you want to work?
Prospects in transit country:	Please, what did you perceive as positive in country X? What did you hope for? Tell me a bit more about the financial situation. How was it about work or education?
Prospects in Germany:	What did you expect to do when you arrived in Germany? What are your current goals? Where do you see yourself in 5 years? And where do you see yourself in 15 years? What do you want to achieve by then?
Development of prospects:	To what extend have your plans changed in the last years? What caused this change?
Duration of stay:	What comes to your mind when you think about going back to Syria? Was it always like this? Please, tell me about the development of your plans concerning the length of the stay.
4. Information channels	
Information in country of origin:	What information did you receive about the way to Europe? How did you receive this information? Where did you receive information from? What did you know about the person you got the information from?
Information on the move:	How did you get information whilst being on the flight? Which channels, websites or media did you use? How could you be sure that you could trust the person? How could you communicate in this situation?
Information in Germany:	How would you let others know if you want to share your opinion of Germany? What would you tell other Syrians? Would it vary in contrast to what you tell me?
5. Decision-making	
Priorities:	What was the most important thing for you, you wanted to reach? Which role played your family and your friends? On the flight, what was most important for you? When did you start thinking about your future and your work/education? Please, tell me more about your contact with the local community in country X and in Germany. Were you able to support others who fled Syria?
Reliability of information:	What information helped you most? How could you make sure that the information was right? Why did you trust this information?
Time and place of decision:	When did you know that you would end up living in Germany? Where have you been at that time? Please, can you tell me about the main "turning points", situations in which things changed for you? Did you start to feel safe or relieved after reaching a certain point or place?
Locality:	Can you tell me more about the reasons why you went to Germany/Europe? Did you have any previous links or connections to Germany? Do you have any links to other European countries? Where did other people, who you know, go? Where is your family living? Did you have any language knowledge?
Others involved:	On the flight or before, have you been discussing next steps with others? Who was this and how did it look like? Who was involved and who have you been in contact with? How could you help others?
Transparency of migration procedure:	When did you get to know, how the asylum application system works? When did you receive information about the asylum procedures? Where did you get information from?
Knowledge about alternatives:	What other options instead of going to Germany have you considered? Where could you have ended up? Were there any other routes possible? Would there have been a legal option/ Was this important to you?

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6. Capability approach	
Ability:	If you had a chance, what would you change in your life? Are there situations where you cannot reach what you would like to achieve? What are the reasons for this?
Well-being:	How do you find life here in Germany? How did you feel in Syria and in country x? How was your financial situation? Please tell me more about any work or education.
External expectations:	How is it for you if you are seen by others as a "refugee"? How do you perceive yourself? How would you describe your role in society? What does your family/friends/partner expect from you?
Policies:	Which influence do policies have on your life? How is your daily life influenced by governmental decisions? What influence does the BAMF have? How were the policies in country X? How about crossing the EU-Border, what difference did it make to you?
Power structures:	In how far do you feel dependent and where are you independent? In which situations do you feel powerless? What would help you to change this?
Loss:	In which areas, do you think, you could reach more? Are there any things that you cannot do here but that you could do in Syria? Is there anything that you are currently missing?
7. Risks and protecting factors:	
Resources of refugees:	What helped you during the flight and here in Germany? Can you rely on support from your family and friends? What helped you to manage to come to Germany? In which situations do you need support, currently? How were you able to pay for expenses on the flight?
Support received:	What support did you get at various stages of your flight? How did it come that you received this support? How could you get support during the flight? Who did you get help from? Could you trust the people who supported you? Could you rely on the support? How did media support you during the flight?
Obstacles on the way:	What unexpected obstacles and problems did you face before coming to Germany? What was the major difficulty you had to face? Did you know about these problems beforehand?
Challenges:	What was difficult for you on the flight? What problems do you face currently? How do you cope with these problems?
8. Additional support:	
What could have helped you to make a decision in this situation? What would you have expected in addition? In your opinion, how can you contribute to society in Germany the best?	
III. Ending note	
Is there anything else that you would like to share?	

This interview guideline was adapted from Gahleitner, 2005c: 45-48.

Before conducting the interviews, every interviewee received a consent form in the language the interview was held. The whole form was explained and perused face-to-face. All interviewees received contact details of the interviewer so that they could withdraw consent at any point. No interviewee withdrew consent during the research process. Interviews were conducted by the author of this article and were recorded by using a voice recorder for precise documentation. This enables concentration on the communication process and the observation of the surroundings and non-verbal expressions (Witzel, 2000, para. 8). Disruptions or non-verbal expressions were documented on the sheet of the interview guideline. At a later point, the notes were transferred to the transcriptions. The interviews took place in separate but public places.

Witzel (2000) and Flick (2014) propose to use a short questionnaire for gathering basic data. It is separated from the interview as it follows a question-answer scheme that would undermine the intention of open questions in the main interview. Furthermore, postscripts

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were used. Ideas for the interpretation of data can be recorded as well as criteria for further interviewees or required changes for following interviews (Witzel, 2000, para. 9). The post-interview notes were developed in accordance with the template presented by Gahleitner (2005c).

4.2 Sampling

In the beginning of the research process, a theoretical sampling was conducted. Further secondary conditions were introduced successively. This step-by-step approach facilitated diversity among interviewees and reflected the process-orientation within the research (Witzel, 2000, para. 4).

The first reason for using expert interviews in this research project was to obtain information on the current situation of Syrian refugees in transit countries. The second aim was to collect data for possible recommendations for social work. Finally, the integration of perspectives from experts in transit countries was important for interpreting phenomena from a different point of view. The inclusion of professionals' expertise may help to counterweigh a solely Western or European interpretation of decision-making processes. Three criterions were developed for the sampling of the experts. First, the expert should have a professional background in social work. In addition, this expert should work directly with Syrian refugees or take part in research projects that focus on this group. Finally, the expert needs to have experiences with social work practice or theory in one of the transit countries.

Different requirements were developed for the sampling of refugees. First, the recruited person had to be an adult Syrian refugee. Second, the person should have spent at least 6 months in a transit country and at least one year in Germany. This criterion is important because the decision-making process in transit countries is analysed from a retrospective view. Furthermore, the time frame concerning residency in Germany ensured that the refugee was confronted with experiences that might have challenged his or her expectations. Third, the person should have an advanced language level so that he or she would be able to express himself or herself in English or German. The interviews relied heavily on building a trusting relationship. Since critical political and potentially traumatic experiences were shared, it seemed inappropriate to include an additional person in the interview. A purposive sampling as recommended by Flick (2014: 175-176) was applied. The suggestion to recruit typical cases was dismissed. The main common feature is that people were forced to leave their home country but otherwise, the group of Syrian refugees is characterised by a high level of diversity (DRC, 2016: 3; UNHCR, 2017: 7). Therefore, the aim was to recruit differing cases with a maximal variation. This included searching for Syrian refugees who came to Germany by different routes. As the political situation in Syria is highly polarising, critical or sensitive cases were searched for in which interviewees were either involved with the Syrian government or actively opposing it. An overview of the recruited experts and refugees is proved in table 2:

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Table 1: Interviewees

Expert	Expert 1	Expert 2	Refugee	Adnan	Maya	Khaled	Hakim
Date of interview	08/2018	07/2018	Date of interview	08/2018	08/2018	08/2018	08/2018
Place of interview	Primary school (Jordan)	Restaurant in a hotel in Amman (Jordan)	Place of interview	Café in a town centre (Germany)	Café in a town centre (Germany)	Café in a town centre (Germany)	Café in a town centre (Germany)
Gender	Female	Female	Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male
Age	Middle aged	Approx. 30 years old	Age	29 years old	38	31	19
Education and work	Professor at a University	Senior Capacity Building Case Manager and PSS officer (Master of Social Work)	Education and work	Bachelor in archaeology, master's course in archaeology suspended in third semester	Bachelor's degree in information, unemployed	High school education, before working as IT-technician, part-time employment	Secondary school
Work in this area	Lecturer in social work, participation in international projects that are concerned with forced migration	Child protection in Syrian and host community and other nationalities. Building capacity of the juridical system concerning juvenile justice	Marital status	Single	Married	Single	Single
			Religion	Muslim	None	Muslim	Muslim
			Origin in Syria	Aleppo	Rural area outside of Aleppo	Homs	Aleppo

Criteria for being an expert	Professional background in social work, working with Syrian students and in a research project on Syrian refugees living abroad	Social work master's student and working as CP-officer, working with Syrian children, studying and working in Lebanon	Financial Situation	Scholarship that covers language course and living expenses	Job seeker's allowance	Job seeker's allowance and zero tax part-time employment	Job seeker's allowance
			Residence status	Three years residence permit	One-year residence permit	Three years residence permit	Three years residence permit
			Time spent in Germany	Two years and six months	One year	Three years	Three years

4.3 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed. Transcription rules were developed in accordance with the transcription conventions by Flick (2014) and the transcription rules by Dresing et al. (2015). Interviews held in English were transcribed in English and the one interview in German was transcribed in German. The computer programme MAXQDA[4] was used to analyse the data in accordance with the qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2015, 2000). The categories were developed pursuant to the structured content analysis by Gahleitner (2005a). Gathered data was dissected and processed step-by-step. In the beginning, a deductive approach prevailed. This ensured that the research process links into previous research findings. At a later stage, inductive processes were implemented (57-58).

A code system in accordance with Lee's push and pull model (1966) was used for a first data screening. Furthermore, categories derived from the interview guideline were used. By applying the code system, a first structure was imposed on two interviews. First, sub-categories were developed. In a second step, the code system was reviewed and adapted (Gahleitner, 2005a: 58-59). A specific code description that relates to the research question was developed and all excerpts within the interview that referred to a specific category were coded accordingly. All categories and sub-categories received a meaningful heading that should be interpreted in relation to the main categories. In addition, the category was described with a short summary and instructions that needed to be followed if categories overlapped. Finally, an example for the category was given. During the review of the categories, it became apparent that the general allocation of push and pull factors did not allow for an adequate coding. Also, the high differentiation of categories at the beginning did not reflect the research question. Finally, four main categories remained and the second main category of 'Decision-making Processes' was sub-divided further. The final category system is presented in table 3:

[4] MAXQDA, Software for Qualitative Data Analysis. (1989-2018). Berlin: VERBI Software-Consult-Sozialforschung GmbH.

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Table 2: Final Category System

1. Background Data
2. Decision-making Processes
2.1 Structural Factors
2.1.1 Situation in Syria
2.1.2 Situation in Transit Country
2.1.3 Situation in Germany
2.1.4 Migration Dynamics
2.2 Personal Factors
2.2.1 Expectations
2.2.2 Prioritising of Needs
2.2.3 Received Support
2.2.4 Agency of Refugees
2.2.5 Information
2.2.6 Trustworthiness
2.3 Decision Taking
2.3.1 Decision Takers
2.3.2 Time and Form of Decision
2.3.3 Decision on Locality
2.3.4 Interpretation of Decisions
3. Social Work Implications
4. Reflection on Interviews

After the final review of the structured content analysis, MAXQDA-tools were used for data output.

5 Research Results

5.1 Recruitment of Interviewees and Experts

Interviewees in Germany were recruited by using a snowball system. Overall contact to eight Syrian refugees was established. Two of them had no time during the period for interviews. Two more were excluded after a pre-screening. One of them had insufficient language proficiency, the other one was excluded because of ethical concerns as he was in an emotional crisis. The aim to interview an employed person or someone who had children remained unaccomplished. However, diversity among interviewees regarding gender, traveling routes, religious beliefs, educational backgrounds, occupational experiences, and political involvement was achieved. The experts were recruited during the mobilities of a DAAD funded Higher Education Dialogue programme. It became apparent that the chosen topic may cause tensions due to the political sensitivity about issues related to refugees in neighbouring countries. Interviewed experts may face individual or professional consequences if they speak openly or if they are politically biased. Therefore, it was important to build up a trusting relationship that was built up in personal meetings and to preserve confidentiality.

5.2 Case Presentations

In the following section, the four Syrian interviewees are introduced.

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5.2.1 Adnan[5]

Adnan is a Muslim who used to live in Aleppo. He left Syria after having finished his bachelor's degree in archaeology in 2012. He is single and speaks Kurdish, English, and German besides his mother tongue, Arabic. In Lebanon, he started studying a master's degree in archaeology but had to discontinue it before graduating. He chose Lebanon for his studies because it was difficult for him to study in Syria and the short distance to Syria allowed him to visit his family. His plan was to return to Syria once the master's course would have been completed. His passport expired in August 2015 and Adnan was not able to renew it. He had not done his military service yet and could not go to the embassy. For him, it was not an option to stay in Lebanon without legal status. Adnan had a Syrian friend in Turkey and they started gathering information about possible routes to Europe via social media. In July 2015, Adnan arrived in Germany and soon moved into a rented flat. The rent is paid by a scholarship that covers daily expenses and a language course. Learning the language is perceived as the greatest challenge. Adnan is volunteering as a translator with the Red Cross and plans to (re)start his master's course in archaeology.

5.2.2 Maya

Maya is 38 years old, married, and describes herself as non-religious. She grew up in a rural area outside of Aleppo. Maya has a bachelor's degree in informatics and speaks, besides her mother tongue of Arabic, English, German, and French. In Syria, she was a lecturer at a private university and worked for the Syrian government as head of the institute for languages in a cultural centre. In 2013, she moved with her husband to Lebanon and found a job as an educational field officer with the Norwegian Refugee Council. Her husband did not find employment. The couple decided that Maya's husband should flee to Europe alone as no financial means for travelling together were available. In May 2015, he was granted refugee status in Germany and applied for family reunification. Maya had to wait another year and a half until she could get an appointment at the embassy and another five months until she finally flew to Germany. She considered destinations in other Arabic countries because her family is living there, but she did not see employment opportunities and a future for her planned child in these countries. Maya has lived in Germany since August 2017 and struggles with learning the language. She resides in a women's shelter and is searching for employment.

5.2.3 Khaled

Khaled grew up in Homs, is single, and arrived in Germany in 2015. He finished his high school education in Syria and worked afterwards as an IT-technician in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Besides his mother tongue (Arabic), he speaks English and German. After having worked in Saudi Arabia for a year, the war in Syria started. Khaled returned to Syria to join the revolution. When the situation became life-threatening for him, he used his contacts in Saudi Arabia and got a visa. Later he went to Turkey, where he saw no perspective for himself and felt that he could either return to Syria or go to Europe. He met two Syrians who offered to arrange the sea-crossing to Greece. However, he distrusted these persons and refused their offer. He met another Syrian man and slowly

[5] For confidentiality reasons, all names have been changed and assumed names are used for publishing.

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they built up trust and continued their journey together. By chance, they got in contact with a smuggler and deposited money that would be disbursed after their arrival in Greece. On the journey, the motor of the rubber boat broke and Khaled describes that he had to swim.

5.2.4 Hakim

Hakim is 19 years old, Muslim, and grew up in Aleppo. He speaks Arabic, German, and has basic English knowledge. When Hakim was about 13 years old, he and his family fled from Syria to Turkey. From there, they continued to Egypt where they live with a cousin. In the beginning, the life situation in Egypt was experienced as pleasant and calm. In particular, having the same language, similarities in cultures, and the proximity to Syria were perceived positively. When the political situation in Egypt changed, Hakim's family had to flee once more to Istanbul. One of his uncles was already in town and had a job, Hakim attended school for half a year, and his brother found employment. The generated income was insufficient to sustain the family for a long period because the costs of living were too high. Therefore, the whole family moved to Mersin which is located further east and closer to the Syrian border. Despite his age, Hakim had to work in several places. One employer told Hakim to go to Germany as his educational and personal prospects would be far better there. In 2015, he paid for the sea crossing by boat to Greece, left his family, and arrived two weeks later in Germany.

5.3 Factors in the Decision-making Process

The following research results are divided between structural and individual factors; this allows a distinction between factors that are applicable to most or all Syrian refugees and factors that are distinct for each individual. These two categories are not applied exclusively, therefore overlapping is possible. Afterwards, aspects of decision taking are presented.

5.3.1 Structural Factors

Structural factors in countries of destination, transit, and arrival are organised in categories adapted from Lee's push and pull model (1966). Obstacles, such as border regimes and migration dynamics are considered within this category of structural factors as they are beyond individual control.

The situation in Syria affected the four interviewees differently. Maya reports that the war situation caused missing freedom, an infringement of basic needs, and was the main reason to leave Syria. Further problems such as power cuts for several days, general lack of support, problems to fulfil daily tasks, or intermissions in schooling effected daily life. Maya describes the situation as follows:

> "I found myself like I am dying so slowly. […] The easy thing that you got used to have, it was that time, very difficult. Very difficult to achieve. Everything. Everything, from bread to whatever you like. When you find that, in the war you are not able, you cannot be part of this world."

Besides differences in gender aspects, age seems to influence the pressure for flight. Young men are especially at risk for becoming a conscript. Interviewees describe having only three options: support the Syrian regime, the opposition, or flee from Syria. Other

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negative factors such as a lack of women's rights, corruption, and insufficient possibilities for education or occupation are not directly linked to war. Some other factors are appreciated about life in Syria. Political involvement and change of the circumstances in their country of origin is considered one reason for staying in or returning to Syria as well as proximity to family. Especially cultural aspects such as socialising and building up friendships are positive aspects about Syria, as highlighted by Khaled:

> "We are social people, like we make friends for nothing. Sitting, waiting for a bus in Syria and the guy next to me, we start talking and we are friends."

Narratives about the situation in transit countries vary highly regarding the level of details. To be able to understand the situation of Syrian refugees in transit countries, the political situation and historical migration movements in each country must be considered separately. The high number of Syrian refugees, in combination with pre-existing refugee communities, puts immense pressure on neighbouring countries: Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Expert 2 highlights that in Lebanon, refugees often live in scattered tents, face precarious living conditions, face prejudices, and are affected by the governmental non-interference approach and its inability to support even Lebanese citizens. The access to residency status is an important factor that influences possibilities to settle. Beside these exemplary challenging factors, positive social factors of living in neighbouring countries exist. The proximity to the area of origin makes travelling easier and may allow one to visit relatives who are in Syria. Support may be received from family members, and speaking the same language allows them to communicate easily with the host community. Hakim's interpretation of Islam allows him to obey its religious rules only in Muslim countries. Turkey is a bottle neck as the Eastern Mediterranean route starts in this country. At the time when the three male interviewees entered Turkey, there were no specific entry conditions for Syrians. Although safety is secured in a certain country, poverty and a rise in living costs may force Syrian refugees to move to another place. Decision-making processes in transit countries are partially based on a rational weighing of holding or attracting factors and repelling factors. Contradictory statements in the interviews disclose that Syrian refugees often face situations in transit countries in which no loophole can be found, the consequences of decisions are unforeseeable, and the possibilities for informed choices are very limited.

The prospect of living in safety is one of the main attractive factors named by interviewees regarding Germany. Another attracting factor is the individual freedom. Furthermore, the distinctiveness of rules, the general structured organisation of things, as well as the low level of arbitrariness from governmental institutions is mentioned by interviewees. Whilst Maya emphasises that she never faced harassment from the host society in Germany and that she feels respected, Khaled reports about discrimination. All interviewees want to stay in Germany for at least the next five years and probably permanently. Current goals of interviewees are described clearly and mainly focus on education, work, and German language acquisition. The prospects and goals of the four interviewees reflect changing life realities of Syrian refugees who are living in Europe. These changes are predicted in the elaborations of expert 1 from Jordan. Moving to another country often means making some sacrifices and is a hard and far-reaching decision. The loss of social and family contacts was expressed by all four interviewees as well as other similar repelling factors. Learning the German language is considered the greatest challenge by three interviewees. The other main challenge is to get used to the culture and to arrange with daily living tasks whilst residing in a foreign country.

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Limited access to financial means is described as one of the main obstacles to reach further flight stages. Furthermore, border crossings are described as hazardous. Adnan and Hakim were afraid of being beaten or imprisoned if caught by the Hungarian police. Further risks include intentional harm, such as deception by smugglers and exploitation by people, or severe weather conditions during sea crossings. After arrival in Europe, Hakim experienced the situation in Greece as the main challenge during flight and even considered returning to Syria:

> "When I reached Greece, I said to myself: 'If I had stayed in Syria, I would be better off than in Greece.' In Syria the government was against us, they rant and rave at us, and they make everything against us. However, it was better than the government in Greece or the people who are there. They treated us badly."

Further obstacles on the move that relate to daily living needs are described; these include inappropriate sleeping conditions, missing hygiene facilities, restrictions on movement by police, as well as limited food intake. In Maya's case, the main obstacle was to get an appointment at the German Embassy in Beirut. New obstacles arise or known obstacles may decrease as time passes and the situation changes. In 2015, it was possible for Syrians to enter Turkey without a visa; this changed in the beginning of 2016 and impedes entry. The situation in Europe is always changing as well, and moving into and within Europe has become even more difficult. Hakim describes the connection between international media presence in Hungary and eased conditions for the journey through the country. When he arrived at the border, Hakim was fortunate that it was open; this changed shortly after he passed. These dynamics are hardly predictable and are considered as being a structural factor because driving forces arise that lay beyond individual control. The observation of others who are moving to Europe was mentioned by all four interviewees. Hakim describes that the main aim in this flight movement is to be on the move and therefore, to save time, retain resources, and reduce risks. Khaled describes his experiences of being in this flight movement as follows:

> "We do not know what next. We just do it. And this kind of/ this adventure, it is dangerous, and it is funny at the same time. […] You do not know if the Greece people, they accept you? The government, they will give you shelter or money, or food or anything? Or you just will be in the streets or police or anything. We just crossed the sea and we are planning each step alone, because you cannot plan the whole journey. Yeah, and we just went there, and the thing was a little bit easy. It was a little bit dangerous crossing the sea, of course, and we swim."

5.3.2 Individual Factors

Individual factors relate to situations at all stages of flight and focus on the interviewees' explanation of interrelations. The qualitative content analysis revealed six main individual factors (Expectations; Prioritising of needs; Received Support; Agency of refugees; Information; Trustworthiness) that are presented in the following paragraphs. The retrospective approach of this research project allows an analysis of the consequences of these factors on the whole decision-making process.

The expectations towards Germany are similarly positive among the interviewees and a familiarity with the life situation is anticipated. Life in Europe is often perceived by interviewees as being a dream or a life in paradise, but differences between European Member States are recognised. The perception that leads to the general assumption that

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Europe is a dreamland can be divided into several aspects. First, Europe is perceived as being a safe and free place. In addition, the labour situation is anticipated to be prosperous. Furthermore, the general life situation is seen as positive and the interviewees expect better (financial) opportunities. The retrospective approach in this research project allows one to scrutinise these assumptions.

The previously named problems in Germany indicate that purely positive expectations will most likely be challenged to some extent. When analysing the excerpts, it becomes apparent that the expectations of all interviewees changed in some way after arrival in Germany as they were validated by individual experiences. When faced with life realities at the destination, interviewees describe overly idealised expectations. Some of them were exceeded whilst others proved to be untrue. Khaled describes his disappointment and critical view on his own expectations as follows:

> "That is what we know and one big fault of me or other people, what we thought about Germany, it was like, those here would be like, too much work and very easy to earn money and would be very easy, rich life. Like, one or two years, you will have a house, you have a car, you have a very good job, and very big, decent money. This I cannot support."

The analysis of the interviews showed that the prioritisation of different needs had an influence on the decision-making process, and that the decision for onward movement had consequences for the fulfilment of individual needs. Interviewees differentiate between basic needs, such as nutrition, livelihood, or safety, and additional needs like freedom, education, or proximity to family. Adnan describes his situation as follows:

> "First step, food, safe place, and like some of the most important things. Electricity, just a comfortable bed, sleep. This is the basic. […] But as a normal person, when you got it, you have to think about your life as a person."

The interviewees prioritised individual needs in very different ways. When living in Lebanon, Adnan had to decide whether he wanted to stay close to his relatives, and therefore be exposed to danger, or move onward and live far away from his family but with increased security and more possibilities for individual development. Maya describes two main unfulfilled needs that caused migration. First, her husband could not find employment. Second, she wanted to have a baby and saw no possibility for family planning in Lebanon. When Khaled stayed in Turkey, he considered going back to Syria. He decided against this option because he envisioned his life at risk. Similarly, staying in Turkey was not an option, as he would have been forced to live on the street. Despite Hakims preference towards Turkey, he moved onwards as he could not continue his education in Turkey.

Support from others is required to finance or organise life in transit countries and to finance and plan onward movement. The main resources for all interviewees at different stages of flight are friends and family. The ability to cope with strains in transit countries depends on support from others. Adnan, for example, needed financial support from friends to be able to provide a bank deposit that would have allowed him to stay in Lebanon. Maya describes that she received support from her landlord, who stood surety for her stay in Lebanon. A friend of Khaled helped him to acquire the visa for Saudi Arabia, and Hakim was supported by family members and friends. The prevalence of supporting structures among Syrian refugees in transit countries is confirmed in the expert interviews. Cases in which Syrians share rent or send remittances to relatives are described. Often,

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financial means for onward movement cannot be generated by the individual on her or his own. Therefore, funding from friends or family members was of high importance. In addition, mutual support from friends 'on the move' was named as the main resource to manage onward movement. Support was provided in the form of shared knowledge, shared efforts to organise onward movement, mutual reassurance and safeguarding, and company in general. Throughout the interviews it became apparent that interviewees distrusted governmental and non-governmental support. Information provided in leaflets or by non-governmental organisations [NGOs] is seen critically.

Coping strategies of interviewees can be detected on several levels, at different stages of flight, and even during the interview. The variety ranges from Adnan's considerations to secure his social protection in Syria by having more children to Khaled's handling of the difficult sea crossing to Greece. During flight, different coping strategies became apparent. The previously named support by and for others is important as it reduces risks. Furthermore, Khaled describes the usage of services of an office in Turkey where he deposited the payment for the smuggler until he reached Greece. Besides this, Hakim describes support from Syrian Samaritans in Turkey who advocate for fellow Syrians, provide employment opportunities, or help to organise onward movement. In addition, excerpts of the interviews indicate coping strategies in Germany. All four interviewees approach challenges in their own individual way. Adnan is very interested in social contacts with the host society, but his main ambition is becoming an archaeologist. He interprets challenges in relation to meeting this goal. Maya is mainly challenged by her current life situation and, therefore, searched for support in a women's shelter. Khaled feels that he has to constantly fight and struggle with the political and societal system and change it by this means. Finally, Hakim describes life as having always been difficult. If something is to be achieved, he needs to work hard towards his goals.

Word-of-mouth information from fellow Syrians is the main source of information, as described by Maya: "You know, because the information that we got from people, usually we trust more. Yeah, because it depends on Syrians." During flight, information from friends or acquaintances who are also traveling, or who travelled before, were of especially high importance for the interviewees. Telephones or mobile devices are used to communicate with families or other persons and to receive information. The interviewees mentioned that the content of information has regard to four main topics. First, information on possible routes to Europe is passed on. Second, information on the situation in Germany is received before arrival and shared with relatives and friends after arrival at the destination. Despite this, the knowledge of interviewees about the asylum procedure before entering Europe remained scarce. Third, the progress of flight is shared with relatives in Syria or in transit. Finally, circumstances in Syria and possible return prospects are discussed. Official web pages are not commonly used by the interviewees. Media coverage plays an ambiguous, but important, role for the interviewees. First, media in the form of movies as well as news shape the individual image of Europe. Second, information about the situation in Syria is gathered via media reports. Third, media coverage is described to influence the public opinion towards refugees in transit countries.

At different stages of the decision-making process, the establishment of trust or distrust has an importance. Khaled, who travelled in the beginning on his own, finds the establishment of trust difficult and hazardous: "Trust everyone and do not trust anyone. It is complicated, because you should trust someone." The individual interpretation about

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the validity of information has an influence as well as trust in other migrating Syrians or distrust in smugglers and governments. The interviewees mostly had a clear opinion about whether they could trust persons, sources of information, private institutions, or public bodies. Individuals who are known personally, and to whom a relationship exists, are trusted most by the interviewees. Furthermore, excerpts indicate that other Syrians in general, and Syrians who are in the flight movement, receive trust, and their information is perceived to be true. Because of their experiences, the Syrian regime is distrusted in general by the interviewees. This mistrust is transferred to other governments and their institutions.

5.3.3 Decision taking

Overall, four categories (actors, form of decision, time, and locality) that influence decision taking were derived in the content analysis. During the interviews, all participants presented themselves, to a certain extent, as decision takers in the decision to move onwards. Although pressure was put on Adnan because of his expiring passport, he states clearly that he was the person who decided to move onwards. Maya expressed reservation towards the decision to leave Lebanon but decided, together with her husband, that he should move first and that she would follow. When Khaled was in Turkey, he had the option to either return to Syria, to stay in Turkey, or to travel to Europe. His family stopped him from going to Syria as they feared for his life, so he decided for the other option. The decision to move to Europe enabled Hakim to detach from his family: “They let me so that I could decide. That was a great moment for me. I want to live MYSELF, with my [own] family, and then I can gather more experiences.” The involvement of other persons or actors in the decision-making process, as well as in the decision taking, is manifold. The previous elaboration on received support highlights that the possibility to take a decision may depend on others. Furthermore, it is described that decisions are taken in agreement with other persons that are not relatives. States influence possibilities for decision taking through border policies and media coverage which may change the host society’s perception of refugees and either force them to leave or to open previously closed borders. Even though each interviewee took the decision to move onward for himself or herself, in every case, other persons or actors were involved.

The evaluation of the decision to leave the transit country and to flee to Germany varies between the four Syrian interviewees. Although Khaled opposes the Syrian regime and is aware of security issues, he sees the situation in Syria as slightly better than in the transit country, Saudi Arabia. Adnan describes quality of life in Germany as being good, as he neither experienced the same level of safety in Syria nor in Lebanon. Nevertheless, the flight to Germany left him on his own and with a feeling of being detached from family and friends. Maya rates the quality of life in Germany and in Lebanon as similar. The ambiguity and the frustration about her current situation in Germany is reflected in the excerpts. Khaled describes an initial disappointment about Germany and asserts that it is not the ideal destination for all Syrian refugees. However, in Germany he found the freedom and democracy that he wanted to fight for in Syria. Hakim describes that the most desired place of living for him would be Istanbul, if he had the educational possibilities. In Germany, the main problem for Hakim is his inability to practice Islam in accordance with his standards.

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The time and place of decision-making cannot be reduced to a single moment or incident. The case presentations illustrate that decision taking often depends on having reached certain requirements, such as physical safety, in neighbouring countries. All participants describe that in the early stages of the war in Syria, and at the beginning of their flight, they did not consider fleeing to Europe. This tendency is clearly visible in Adnan's comment: "The decision from Syria to Germany it was not in the plan. Like to come to Germany it was NEVER EVER in the plan. The first decision was to go to Lebanon after my studies." As indicated before, the decision-making process is not a linear process; therefore, the choice of a destination country is not always predictable. This process includes decisions that are not taken autonomously by individuals. This makes it necessary to consider structural factors that influence the outcome. Nevertheless, an individual weighing of possible prospects and expectations leads interviewees to favour a specific place or country. Especially in the retrospective considerations of interviewees, positive, as well as negative, aspects of Germany are weighed. Regarding the decision about the locality, not only European States were considered by interviewees. Return prospects to Syria are described; however, this alternative has been discarded due to security reasons.

6 Discussion

6.1 Decision-making of Syrian Refugees 'on the Move'

The constructive approach of this research study helped to reveal the processual character of decision-making and to understand expectations and prospects of Syrian refugees 'on the move'. The importance of analysing refugee movements as multi-step movements is highlighted in different migration models (Brekke & Aarset, 2009; Kunz, 1973; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). Decision-making is described as a process that includes multiple decisions and the evaluation of information (Brekke & Aarset, 2009). In the determination of factors that influence decision-making, it proved to be useful to consider this processual character. It allows the revelation of influences at different locations and points in time. The processual character limits predictions about outcomes but allows the acknowledgement of constantly changing routes, general conditions, and individual reasoning. The research findings on factors that influence the decision-making processes are discussed in the following sections. To make the results more accessible, the process is visualised in figure 2:

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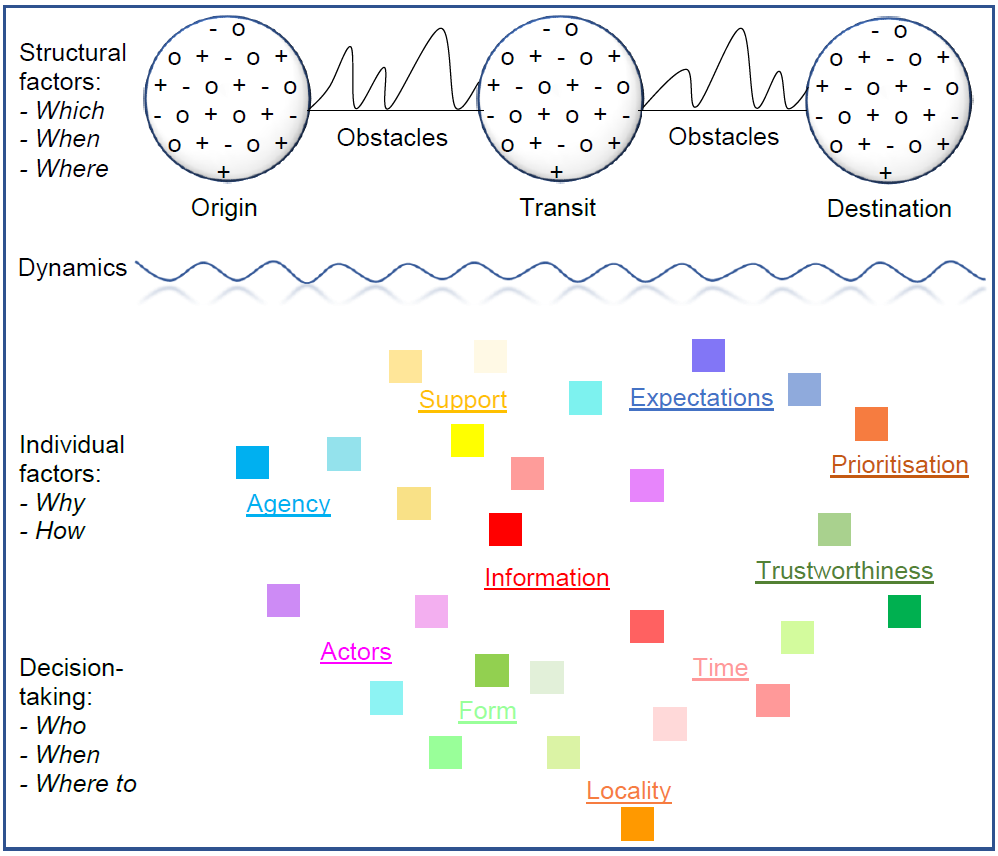
Figure 2: Decision-making Process of Syrian Refugees



The first level represents structural factors. On this level, the question of which circumstances influence decisions in Syria, transit countries, and in Germany is considered. Many factors that can be put in accordance with Lee's push and pull model (1966) were named by the interviewees. Furthermore, the research reveals when and where barriers and structural factors are important for the individual. The retrospective approach enables a consideration of structural factors from different points of time and localities. Depending on the stage of flight, the interpretation and influence of structural factors and obstacles may change. The second level is titled dynamics. It acknowledges flight dynamics as well as changes in migration policies. On the third level, the six individual factors are displayed. The main question on this level is why and how decisions have been taken. The colour-coding illustrates the overlapping and interconnectedness of different factors. The final, and fourth, level considers the actual decisions-taking and includes the four categories 'Actors', 'Form', 'Time', and 'Locality'. The question of who is taking the decision is elaborated. Furthermore, the temporal aspect of when, and the decision on the locality (described by 'where to'), is discussed.

The precarious situations of Syrian refugees in transit countries is one main factor that influences the decision-making process as well as pull factors in Europe (Brekke & Aarset,

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2009). Factors such as infringement of personal safety in Syria and aspiration for safety, freedom, education, distinctive rules, or low level of arbitrariness are confirmed in this study. Lee's push and pull model (1966) was one of the most useful models to describe holding or attracting, as well as repelling, factors at different stages of flight. The inductive coding process revealed factors that were favourable whilst living in Syria. These factors include the desire to influence the outcome of the Syrian war, to help people in Syria, to sustain proximity to family members, and to maintain traditional family structures. Likewise, factors in destination countries are not exclusively appealing but can be repelling as well. Two factors that are named by Khaled and Hakim should be highlighted as they mostly remain unmentioned in current research about decision-making processes. Cultural and religious challenges at the destination are seen as being repelling factors, to the extent that they would not recommend coming to Germany to all people, especially not to religious or traditional Syrians. Further research will need to consider the situation in transit countries in more depth, as many decisions of refugees depend on the situation in these countries. The cases of Adnan and Khaled highlight that emigrants might become refugees whilst being in a foreign country. Despite all challenges, interviewees worked in transit countries and planned to build a life there until they were forced by strains to move onwards. The main push factors in transit countries named in current research are confirmed by the statements of the interviewees. These include the absence of perspectives, inadequate support, precarious residency status, limited and low standard educational offers, insufficient and insecure working conditions, a lack of livelihood opportunities, and discrimination or exploitation. Besides these push factors, appealing factors in transit countries persist. The same language, similar cultural and religious background, proximity to Syria, and reciprocal support from family members is named. In addition, changing family structures and roles of women may occur when fleeing to neighbouring countries. Although the consideration of push and pull factors is important, a simplified analysis of push factors at the origin and pull factors at the destination has clear limitations and should not be used as the sole interpretation of decision making. In previous research on Syrian refugees, financial strains were named as the main obstacle for onward movement (DRC, 2016: 4). This finding was confirmed in the interviews. It is indicated that refugees do not "trivialize information about risks. Instead, they attempt to estimate risks by weighing encouraging and discouraging information" (Dekker et al., 2018: 10). Risks remain an obstacle for Syrian refugees. They include intended harm by smugglers, fraudsters, and governmental bodies and unintentional harm during the sea crossing or because of adverse weather conditions.

In addition to considerations about the push and pull model, additional dynamics that influence decision-making process are discussed in current research studies as well as by the interviewees. Brekke and Aarset (2009), for example, name changes in border policies and information flows. Furthermore, interpersonal migration dynamics and the prolonged refugee situations in transit countries have an influence. Syrian refugees may be forced to move onwards when resources are exhausted, hope for the future decreases, and return prospects vanish. It must be stressed that border policies have changed in recent years. When the research was conducted, hostile policies and the enforcement of border controls nearly completely stopped onward movement of Syrian refugees on the Eastern Mediterranean route (European Commission, 2018). In this research, no clear distinction between factors that forced Syrians to move onwards and factors that only promote onwards movement was made. The understanding of migration decisions within a

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continuum (Bartram et al., 2014; Hugo et al., 2018; Schuster, 2016) seemed more appropriate.

The qualitative content analysis revealed six main individual factors that influence decision making: expectations, prioritisation of needs, received support, agency of the refugee, information, and trustworthiness. These factors cannot be interpreted in isolation as they may overlap at certain stages and influence each other. The gradual character of migration and decision-making processes that include forcing factors, as well as rational individual factors, (Schuster, 2016: 297) became apparent in the interviews. Hakim names educational opportunities as the main reason for onward movement to Europe. Maya and Adnan left Syria for educational and occupational reasons and only at a later point received a protection status. The division between structural and individual factors (Koser & Kuschminder, 2016) helped to distinguish between influencing factors. Despite this advantage, the general distinction between structural and individual factors has its limitations. A clear coding and classification of factors such as expectations can be problematic. In the qualitative content analysis, it was revealed that to a certain extent interviewees do not or cannot distinguish between expectations and actual prospects. Resulting from this inability, individual perceptions change and the interviewees are positively surprised or disillusioned after arrival in Germany.

Expectations of the interviewees mainly conform with expectations that were named in previous research studies. Nevertheless, the retrospective approach made it possible to analyse the change of expectations in greater detail and showed that influence of expectations, either mistaken or justified should not be underestimated. The consideration and weighing of needs becomes important in transit countries. Often, the need for freedom, education, and social security is infringed in transit countries. It can be expected that this sample group, which is aged between 19 and 38 years, has different needs than other groups of Syrian refugees and, therefore, Khaled and Hakim would advise elderly and traditional Syrians to stay in neighbouring countries. This tendency is also depicted in the research study by the DRC (2016). Financial support from family members and friends is the main factor that enables Syrian refugees to move onwards (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). This finding is confirmed by the interviewees. At the same time, support in transit countries increases the ability to cope with adverse living conditions and may encourage a longer stay. 'On the move'-support from fellow Syrians is the main source of assistance. Smugglers are only used for a specific and limited timeframe. Even though Khaled described that he moved to a place where he could cross the sea more easily, no direct or long-lasting influence of smugglers on the decision-making process could be detected.

Agency of interviewees and attempts to increase capacity are detectable on different levels. Excerpts suggest that interviewees were actively involved in changing their own and others' situation at all stages of flight. An additional and important coping strategy is the ability to adapt to new circumstances. Brekke and Aarset (2009) highlight the importance of counter flows of information that evolve after first refugees arrive at the destination. Results of the qualitative content analysis and of the literature review assert that these flows support subsequent Syrian refugees and provide useful insight. The availability and content of information influences the decision-making process directly and indirectly. The importance of mobile devices is stressed in current research and by research findings of this project. Word-of-mouth communication with fellow Syrians is the main source of

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information. 'On the move'-advice from friends or acquaintances who are in the same situation is especially important. Previous research by the DRC (2016) and the results from the content analysis highlight that direct and in-depth knowledge of Syrian refugees about the asylum system in Europe does not persist. If knowledge is available, it concerns procedures for family reunification. Findings of this research project on the perceived trustworthiness towards other persons confirm findings of research by Dekker et al. (2018) and the DRC (2016). Family members and direct contacts with strong social bonds are trusted most by Syrian refugees. The general suspicion towards official sources and the inadequate provision of information by these sources is a re-emerging theme.

Rational choices were made by all interviewees. Hakim names educational opportunities as the main reason for onward movement to Europe. Maya and Adnan left Syria for educational and occupational reasons and only at a later point received a protection status. The actual decision taking regarding onwards migration of Syrian refugees has received limited attention in previous research. Research on forced migration and Syrian refugees' decision-making either arranges influencing factors in a hierarchy (DRC, 2016; UNHCR, 2017) or focuses on the influence of smugglers or agents (Brekke & Aarset, 2009; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). The role of the individual refugee and his or her reasoning may be neglected in such attempts. All interviewees expressed an exertion of influence on the decision-making process. At the same time, other persons, such as family members or friends, clearly influenced the outcome of the decision. The decision-making process cannot be reduced to a single moment or incident. Some decisions can only be taken after having reached a certain stage. For all interviewees, moving to Europe became an option after having spent time in transit countries and having considered other possible destinations. Once they had arrived in Europe, Germany was clearly favoured because the situation was perceived as being the best for refugees. The scope of this research project does not allow for further elaborations on the decision-making process. Future research could analyse individual factors to reveal mechanisms that explain decision-making processes further and allow predictions.

6.2 Social Work Perspective

Supporting decision-making processes remains highly difficult in practice-oriented social work and in the context of flight. First, Syrians experience arbitrariness and deception at different stages and, thus, have a high distrust in institutions such as NGOs. Second, social work engages with different actors and the role of social work might remain unclear. Third, during acute flight movements, the circumstances may change quickly and first-hand information is needed. Therefore, it is difficult for social workers to provide appropriate information. Fourth, cross-border movements affect social work that is embedded in national structures. The named challenges make it necessary to consider the social work profession and discipline critically.

Four recommendations for social work are developed in this research. First, social work practitioners and researchers should be aware that they might be distrusted. Syrian refugees cannot be expected to build trust quickly, to have knowledge about the national support and welfare structure, and to demand the services they are entitled to. Time is needed to establish a trusting relationship and to explain structures in the new environment. This approach may prevent false transfer of information, but it could also be used to deter refugees from entering Europe and claiming humanitarian rights. In light of

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this discrepancy, social work must take on responsibility for its actions (Scherr, 2018) in order to build and preserve trust. Second, professionals must acknowledge individual perspectives in the decision-making process. A unidirectional interpretation of push and pull factors neglects life realities of Syrian refugees. Life in Syria is not only repelling and life in Germany not solely appealing. Holistic counselling needs to acknowledge differing individual interpretation and reasoning. Third, it became apparent that professional social work interventions should address the difference between prospects, expectations, and challenges. If Syrian refugees become aware of the difference, disappointments after arrival at the destination might be reduced and informed choices might be promoted. Fourth, it is crucial to gain basic knowledge about the situation at different stages of flight. For social workers in transit countries, this knowledge is essential to be able to promote informed decisions. Evidence-based counselling may question idealised expectations, provide information about possible challenges, and allow for preparation. At the destination, it might be beneficial to include the flight history in the social anamnesis. Social work interventions that promote integration must acknowledge refugees' perspectives to prevent alienation and loss of identity.

7 Limitations

Qualitative content analysis has the advantage that implicit messages can be revealed by putting comments in the wider context of the statement. The advanced understanding of contents, that is not limited to the close meaning of a sentence or words, helps to compensate for possible language barriers. Qualitative content analysis can be applied to this research study as the research question is not completely open-ended and the step-by-step approach rather helps to structure the extensive data and does not necessarily lead to loss of information (Mayring, 2000, para. 27). After the development of the category description, an inter-coder reliability test is suggested (para. 7). In this research project, this verification was not possible due to time restrictions. Nevertheless, the category system was revised by a social science PhD student and the category description was checked for comprehensibility. The interview guideline could not be tested in a rehearsing interview with the target group. The recommended rehearsal (Gahleitner, 2005c: 48) was conducted with a fellow master's social work student instead.

Limitations in the theoretical sampling and in the later recruitment processes emerged. All Syrian interviewees were young adults between 19 and 38 years old. The decision to exclude translators and to conduct interviews only with persons who can express themselves in German or English proved to be helpful and beneficial. The direct contact gave space to establish trust and to address possible misunderstandings directly. Nevertheless, this decision excluded Syrian refugees who do not speak either of these two languages and who possibly face grater challenges at the destination. Further research may focus on Syrian refugees who are working, have limited German or English language skills, or on elderly Syrian refugees. The involvement of an expert from Jordan proved to be less important because none of the Syrian interviewees resided in Jordan before coming to Germany. Instead, it might have been more beneficial to recruit an expert from Turkey who could have given insight into the social work situation in this frequently mentioned transit country.

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8 Conclusion

In this research project, the following question was answered by conducting a literature review and a qualitative content analysis: Which factors influence decision-making of Syrian refugees in the context of forced migration and flight? Six PCIs have been conducted with four Syrian refugees who reside in Germany and two social work experts from Jordan and Lebanon. The qualitative content analysis revealed factors on four levels that influence the decision-making process of Syrian refugees. The first level includes structural factors and represents appealing and repelling factors at origin, transit, and destination, as well as obstacles. The second level is characterised by flight dynamics and acknowledges policy impacts and changes over time. On the third level, six individual factors that influence decision-making have been presented. These are: expectations, prioritisation of needs, received support, agency of refugees, information, and trustworthiness. These factors may overlap and influence each other. The fourth level displays the actual decision taking of Syrian refugees as well as decision makers and locality. This research revealed new findings about the decision-making process of Syrian refugees. Expectations towards Germany change after arrival at the destination. Appealing factors exist in transit countries and in Syria. Religious and cultural differences can become repelling factors at the destination and may outweigh security needs of Syrian refugees.

A unified international social work response to the refugee crisis is hardly feasible because social work is implemented within national structures, has different resources, and has varying historical backgrounds. Difficulties such as a lack of trust in social work, unclear responsibilities, missing information, or different usage of terms can arise. Despite these problems, recommendations for social work have been developed. In this research study, it was not possible to quantify dynamics or structural and individual factors. As a result, only a low predictive value can be derived for these factors. Mechanisms behind decision-making processes, such as the interdependence between access to information and the prioritisation of desired destination countries, have not been analysed in this research project. Future research may be able to validate different factors and to derive underlying mechanisms.

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The Religiosity of Muslim Refugees in Germany: A Resource for Social Work Interventions[1]

Claudia Roßkopf[2]

Abstract

For the majority of Muslims, faith plays a vital role in their lives. Specific forms of religiosity are significant as a resource, or coping mechanisms, in adverse life situations, which also applies to Muslim refugees fleeing to Germany. However, Germany, as well as German social work – which offers an important point of contact for refugees – are both very secular. This article explores the current role of religiosity of Muslim refugees for social work in Germany – and what role it could, and should, play. Qualitative interviews with nine social workers in Lower Franconia working in refugee settings were conducted. They showed that, for various reasons, the religiosity of Muslim refugees only plays a very minor role in the reality of social work. Still, occasionally it surfaces – especially in difficult life situations of the refugees. More frequently than theological issues, practical or organizational religious topics were addressed. Social workers who brought up spiritual matters on their own initiative were either persons whose own faith was vital to them, or they were aware of the importance of religion to Muslim clients. While the primarily supportive effect of religiosity and spirituality in adverse life situations is undisputed, social workers tend to only address it on their own initiative if faith is of concern for themselves or if they know about its supportive function for their Muslim clients. Thus, social workers should be sensitized, background knowledge provided, social work attitude shaped, and action competencies trained.

Key Words:

Muslim, refugees, religiosity, social work, Germany

1 Introduction

More than 2.1 million people have applied for asylum in Germany during the last ten years (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge [BAMF], 2022: 11). Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq were by far the main countries of origin for asylum seekers (BAMF, 2022: 17), meaning that a little over two-thirds of all refugees coming to Germany were Muslim (BAMF, 2022). Despite often being traumatized (Schreiber & Iskenius, 2013: 2), uprooted, separated from family members, and burdened by a new life situation in a foreign country with a foreign culture, language, and lifestyle (Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 4), faith remains essential

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and of great significance for many Muslims (Pirner, 2017: 166). Although existing research on the role of religion in the lives of refugees is not yet satisfactory, it is consistently found that the religiosity of recent immigrants is significantly higher than that of the native population, both among Muslims and Christians (Pirner, 2017: 154; Pfündel et al., 2021: 82f.). As, furthermore, numerous scholars have named faith and religiosity as important resilience factors and coping mechanisms (e.g., Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 17; Pargament, 2002; Koenig, 2012), the question arises whether the religiosity of refugees coming to Germany could, and should, be used as a resource, e.g., to process the trauma of war and flight or gain an easier foothold in the new environment.

However, social work in Germany – the profession which cares for refugees in many respects – is very secular. In social work science, preoccupation with religion has long been considered irrelevant, and in practice, it hardly plays a role beyond church institutions and often only marginally within them (Dhiman and Rettig, 2017a: 7; Nauerth et al., 2017: 12; Nauerth, 2017: 129). On the contrary, great importance is usually attached to the 'neutrality' of social work in matters of faith to underscore that the services offered are open to all persons, regardless of their religion. Even in social work curricula, religion-sensitive competencies, or the like, do not play a role, except at some church-run universities (Freise, 2016: 461).

Only in recent years – triggered, among other factors, by the immigration of Muslim migrants – more voices were audibly claiming that the faith of service users and social workers alike does not necessarily have to be ignored, nor should it be, depending on the situation (Freise, 2021; Nauerth et al., 2017; Hochuli Freund & Hug, 2017).

Presenting findings from a literature review and qualitative research, this article aims to answer the question of whether Muslim refugees' religiosity in Germany actually is, could and/or should be utilized as a resource for social work interventions to cope with refugee-specific challenges.

2 The Situation of Refugees in Germany

Refugees and displaced persons coming to Germany face many challenges. As long as their asylum application has not been decided upon, they live in constant uncertainty and fear of being sent back to their country of origin or the country they first entered within the European Union[3] (Eichinger & Schäuble, 2018; Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 4). During that time, they generally live for up to six months in reception facilities (§§ 44-47 Asylum Act). They are assigned to the specific reception facilities according to their country of origin as well as reception quotas of Federal States and are typically obliged to reside there (§§ 47-49 Asylum Act). They are not allowed to choose their place of residence immediately after arriving in Germany, e.g., to join nearby relatives. As a rule, these reception facilities do not have self-contained apartments. As a result, strangers – most of the time from different countries, in different life situations, and from different milieus – often live together in close quarters or even in the same room, frequently leading to tension and violence, difficult hygienic conditions, permanent noise, and no privacy (Gravelmann, 2018: 379-380). Although the residents are provided with the means for the basic necessities of life, this is almost exclusively in the form of benefits in kind and a centralized food supply. As a result, residents can neither eat their usual meals nor properly pay

[3] For the single steps in the asylum procedure and for a legal background see: BAMF (2019).

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attention to food intolerances or other individual needs during meal preparation (Rehklau, 2018: 184).

While living in a reception facility, refugees are not allowed to work (§ 61 para. 1 Asylum Act) (Werdermann, 2018: 179). For many displaced, this means externally imposed inactivity, boredom, and idleness, which often leads to conflicts (Eichinger & Schäuble, 2018: 278). This also means that there is no possibility for them to earn money. Thus, refugees are still dependent on the German authorities for care and cannot send remittances to their family members who stayed behind in their home country (de Vries, 2018: 70).

For many refugees, the experiences in their home countries (e.g., violence, murder, or captivity), on the often-life-threatening flight, and arrival in Germany (pre-, per-, and post-migration) leads to psychological problems. For example, the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder is up to ten times higher for refugees and asylum seekers compared to the general population. Depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide attempts also occur more frequently (DGPPN, 2016: 1; Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 3f.; Zellmann, 2018: 6).

In addition, the foreign language, the new culture, the Christian or secular environment, the isolation in reception centers with hardly any contact with locals, and the frequent lack of educational opportunities for children mean additional stress for the refugees (Zellmann, 2018; Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 3f.; Zbidat et al., 2020). Whether religion, religiosity, or spirituality can be considered resources for coping shall be addressed next.

3 Religion – Religiosity – Spirituality

According to Lutz (2016), religion is the organization of a culturally distinct 'religious community' with an ordered structure based on collective practices, while religiosity encompasses the individual's subjective experience and hopes placed in faith and the rule of religions. For him, spirituality means the spiritual experience and the search for meaning and transcendence, which can also be a search for God or the Gods of religion but does not necessarily have to be (Bowie, 2005, and Schmidt, 2008, as cited in Lutz, 2016: 11). That means a spiritual approach to life is often religious but does not need to be religious. However, within Christianity and Islam, spirituality is an essential part of religiosity, which is why it is always included in this work when talking about religiosity.

Religiosity is understood in a universal sense as a religious experience and behavior that establishes a "meaningful relationship to a reality perceived as higher, which is attributed to an essential relevance for one's own life"[4] (Huber et al., 2020: 5, translated by the author).

4 The Relationship between Religion and Social Work

Social work is rooted in the Christian-Jewish tradition, but to this day, the subject of religion is almost banned in German social work (outside of ecclesiastical contexts). However, as religion is an essential part of many personal lifeworlds, especially of many religious migrants, social work cannot avoid dealing with religion scientifically. Insights of religious

[4] In the original German text: „sinnstiftenden Bezug zu einer als höher empfundenen Wirklichkeit, der eine wesentliche Relevanz für das eigene Leben zugesprochen wird."

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studies and theology are needed to develop a religiously sensitive social practice (Freise, 2006: 98; Bohmeyer, 2016: 153).

During the last years, interest in the topic of religion and spirituality in social work has gradually grown in Germany, but mainly still as a reaction to external demands, among others, in work with refugees and migrants and in connection with fundamentalism. Thus, the relationship between social work and religion is still seen somewhat as problematic and negative and only slowly as a connecting point for person-centered social work or as an essential part of social work itself (Straub, 2020: 353; El-Dick, 2018: 228; Dhiman & Rettig, 2017a: 7).

5 Meaning of Religiosity in Critical Life Events

Critical life events are severe, stressful challenges that fundamentally change one's life and are accompanied by intense emotions (Filipp & Aymanns, 2010: 16-17). Koenig, who reviewed hundreds of studies on the connection between a person's religion/spirituality and coping with adversities, unveiled a primarily supportive role of religion in illness, mourning, stress, ecological disasters, war, or terrorism (Koenig, 2012: 4).

Illness is the life stressor best studied concerning religiosity as a coping strategy. The reasons why religion and spirituality influence a sick person positively are diverse, even from a strictly scientific standpoint. A strong faith that reveals meaning and purpose even in difficult life situations, an optimistic view of the world that includes the existence of a loving, caring, personal, transcendental power (e.g., God or Allah), and a religious faith that provides satisfying answers to the existential questions of life and death – which reduces anxiety – help one to deal positively with stress. Thus, religion signifies a vital resource to protect against anxiety disorder, depression, substance abuse, or suicide. In addition, unlike other coping resources that rely on health, such as hobbies, work, or relationships, religion may be crucial for individuals with a physical disability. A second reason why religion and spirituality might positively impact a person's mental health is that adhering to the rules and regulations that most religions have preserves an individual from stressful situations and negative emotions. Such could be, for example, divorce, imprisonment for crimes, or abuse of drugs or alcohol, leading to harmful mental health outcomes. Finally, social activities, such as meeting others and helping and engaging others, are highlighted by most religions. This 'selfless' behavior safeguards against stress; it improves positive emotions and distracts from one's own hardships. Furthermore, the encouragement from religions to integrity, tolerance, gratitude, reliability, and other such ideals is essential for supporting social relationships and promoting positive feelings (Koenig, 2012: 7, Klein & Albani, 2007).

Thereby, people benefit more from certain types of faith than from others. For example, intrinsically motivated persons (people who 'live their religion') are healthier regarding mental issues and less prejudiced than extrinsically motivated persons (who make use of their religion for their own or social benefit) (Pargament, 2002). Even persons who identify with a religion, have higher self-esteem and lower depression or anxiety in contrast to persons who internalize religion through introjection (because of worries, guilt, or pressure) (Ryan et al., 1993).

Even faith, based on the confidence that life has a deeper meaning, a reliable relationship with God, and a 'spiritual connectedness' with others, results in better wellbeing (Pargament, 2002; Koenig, 2012: 7). Likewise, faith helps one discover the meaning

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behind experiences, which Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, already recognized as a coping strategy (Frankl, 1999).

Furthermore, socially marginalized groups of people – as refugees in Germany can also be called – benefit more from their religion than others. In tense circumstances, people experience faith as particularly supportive, and such a disputed religious form as fundamentalism, though resulting in more bias towards certain groups, can also contribute to greater personal well-being. Whether religion has a positive effect on individuals also depends on how far it is integrated into their lives, i.e., in how far it provides suitable solutions to a particular problem, in how far the environment also supports this belief, and in how far it fits the person's belief, actions, and motivations (Pargament, 2002).

Abdel-Khalek reviewed several studies to examine whether the findings mentioned above also apply to Muslims. Indeed, he revealed positive relations between Muslim religiosity and well-being, life satisfaction, mental and physical health. More religious persons saw themselves as happier, felt more satisfied, enjoyed better mental and physical health, and religiosity showed to be a "coping mechanism against anxiety and depression" (Abdel-Khalek, 2014: 82).

5.1 The Concept of Religious Coping

Religious coping is the theory underlying the knowledge of the relationship between religiosity and dealing with life stressors. Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 141) describe

> "coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person."

Based on this stress-coping model, Kenneth I. Pargament (1998) developed the 'religious coping' theory. It refers to using all personal and social resources that can be called upon through religiosity, which are available as coping potentials in a stressful situation (Pargament et al., 1998; Kusche, 2014: 13). In this respect, Pargament et al. (1998) recognized different processing patterns divided into positive and negative religious coping. Positive coping methods included a benevolent religious evaluation of adverse situations, seeking (spiritual) support from God, clergy, or parishioners, religious forgiveness, and serving others. They assumed a reliable God-relationship, spirituality, belief in the meaning in life, and spiritual connectedness with others as the basis. Negative coping mechanisms, on the other hand, comprise of resentment toward God, the clergy, and the faith community, a punishing or diabolic religious evaluation of a difficult situation and the questioning of God's power derived from a tense and unstable God-relationship, a worrying worldview, and missing meaning in life (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament, 2002).

As can be assumed, the consequences of these different coping mechanisms vary. While positive coping goes hand in hand with less anxiety and depression, higher livability and – for example, after open-heart surgeries – a reduced threat of mortality, to name a few, this is in contrast to the effects of negative coping mechanisms, such as worse physical health or recuperation, more anxiety and depression, and a higher risk of death amongst older sick persons (Pargament 2002; Klein & Albani, 2007).

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Both qualitative and quantitative research thus revealed religiosity/spirituality as a positive coping resource for most persons dealing with adversities (Koenig, 2012), even among refugees in Germany (Zbidat et al., 2020: 10; Pandya, 2018: 1401).

Concerning intercultural aspects, Fischer et al. (2010) reveal crucial findings comparing the religious coping strategies between Christians and Muslims. While Christians resort mainly to individualistic coping methods when confronted with life adversities (such as looking for personal spiritual support, self-reliance, and problem-solving), Muslims apply more interpersonal and collectivistic ones (seeking social support and information from family members and spiritual leaders). This pattern has been noted in all different kinds of life hardships, like physical and mental illness, bereavement/death, war and emigration, and other individual and collective life stressors.

5.2 The Concept of Resilience

Religiosity and spirituality have furthermore proven to be potential resilience factors. Resilience describes the positive adjustment to an adverse event or circumstance (Sprung et al., 2018), or "the ability of people to cope with crises or difficult life circumstances by drawing on personal and social resources" (Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 6, translated by the author).

Furthermore, O'Dougherty Wright et al. (2013) point to the vital role of culture as a resilience factor. In addition to religious rituals and ceremonies, such as special blessings or healing, specific cultural traditions and community support also have a resilience-promoting effect. This can also apply to members of ethnic or religious minorities supporting each other (e.g., in the case of flight). Even though these aspects, just like the different valuations of individualism, collectivism, and familism, have hardly played a role in resilience research so far, it is most likely that they are of great importance for the individual experiencing adversity (O'Dougherty Wright et. al., 2013). Sleijpen et al. (2018: 357), in their study of young refugees' resilience strategies, found religion to be a substantial resilience factor because of its 'support and guidance', its deterrence from trouble, and as a 'source of hope'. Simojoki (2016: 113) even describes faith as an 'anchor of identity' that can offer stability between the old and new life in a time of great existential uncertainty. It can also help many refugees interpret and process biographical breaks and traumatic experiences before and during their flight (Simojoki, 2016: 113, Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 45).

In addition to personal faith, the concrete help provided by the faith community also plays a respective role, offering practical support in everyday life, networking among each other, and emotional support in the event of experienced hostility and discrimination. Thus, religious communities are valuable resources that take on a protective function for the individual (Pirner, 2017; von Lersner, 2008; Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 6-7; Siegert 2020: 2).

6 Religiosity in the Lives of Refugees

Persons with a migration background living in Germany are significantly more religious than people without a migration background. The consistently higher religiosity of persons with a migration background shows that it is less the religious affiliation than the person's origin that influences their faith (Pfündel et al., 2021).

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Of the Muslim refugees in Germany, two-thirds call themselves very or somewhat religious, and even three-quarters of the refugees stated that religion is very important or essential for their happiness and well-being (Siegert, 2020: 7). Indeed, for only 49% of Germans, religion is vital for life, and for only 30% spirituality is important, with considerable differences between Western and Eastern Germany. Thus, the religion of Muslim refugees plays a far more significant role than that of the German population as a whole (Pickel, 2013: 18-19). In the words of Josef Freise (2017: 69), refugees bring with them, in and with their religion, familiarity to a foreign country in the sense of a 'portable homeland' that gives them security and a sense of home. Furthermore, 'religion helps define their identity' (Gozdziak & Shandy, 2002: 130), as, amid all the changes, religion is a constant that softens their sense of loss (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010: 4).

The significance of religion for health and well-being for people in various life challenges, such as flight, has been extensively described and scientifically documented. However, regarding an in-depth insight into the relationship between Islam and health and well-being, there is a lack of literature, partly since there is still no reliable measurement instrument of Muslim religiosity that has been written based on Islamic teachings and tested among Muslims (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011: 98-99).

Regardless, a few studies exist and reveal a "significant negative relationship between Islamic religiosity with depression and anxiety among the Muslim cancer patients" (Basri et al., 2015: 7), or – in a study about religious-sociocultural psychotherapy in patients with anxiety and depression – a significantly faster improvement of anxiety and depression symptoms if, in the case of persons with a strong religious or cultural background, consideration was given to it, i.e., if the therapist explicitly referred to it (Razali et al., 1998; see also Cruz et al., 2017).

Even in a study examining the influence of religiosity and spiritual coping on health-related quality of life in hemodialysis patients in Saudi Arabia, religiosity and spiritual coping were found to be the relevant aspects to the health-related quality of life of the patients surveyed. Religious practice and intrinsic religious beliefs had the most positive impact on their quality of life (Cruz et al., 2017).

A study about Somali refugee women in Australia revealed two important aspects regarding the importance of their Muslim faith. First, in their situation of 'homelessness' and being without the support of family members and social networks, Islam offers permanence, identity, and an 'anchoring home' that is created through 'practices, routines, and ideologies'. And second, in times of sadness, anxiety, or depression, their faith and especially prayer proposes solace and helps them make sense of their situations and lives. Thus, they experience resilience and continuity through their faith (McMichael, 2002: 179, 186f.).

Since for Muslims, religion is "a way of life (din) or path (tariqat) with God as the anchor that encompasses the total of a Muslim's work, faith, and being" (Mohd Mahudin et al., 2016: 112) obviously, it plays a significant role in and for their lives.

Thus, religion can also be an essential resource for refugee Muslims, which should be noted in social work.

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7 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach. Therefore, in summer 2021, semi-structured expert interviews with nine social workers and respective professionals, who all work with Muslim refugees in a social work context, were chosen to collect the data. The interviews were meant to provide information about the attitudes, experiences, interreligious competencies, and (structural) restrictions of the social workers in their work with Muslims.

Among the nine interview partners, two were men and seven were women, which corresponds with the gender ratio among social workers in Germany. Three interviewed persons were not social workers by qualification, but one was a special needs educator, one a pedagogue, and one a preschool teacher. Six persons worked for church employers (half belonging to the Catholic Church and half to the Protestant Church) and three for non-church employers.

The work settings of the social workers covered different kinds of counseling settings, a residential group for unaccompanied minor refugees, an initiative for traumatized refugees, and a shared accommodation for those in particular need of protection.

Among the interview partners were five Christians (three Protestant and two Catholic), one Muslim, one Alevi, and two persons of no religion. The age of the respondents covered a range from 29 to 57 years.

8 Findings

When 'social workers' are mentioned here, this refers to the persons interviewed in this study who work with refugees in a social work context. As described above, these persons do not all have a degree in social work.

8.1 Reasons Why Religion Does Not Play a (More Significant) Role in Social Work with Refugees

When asked what role the faith of the Muslim refugees plays in their work, the majority of respondents answered that their work is "not really shaped by religion". Even though it will become apparent later that the faith or religiosity of the refugees does at least make an appearance from time to time, the reasons offered for their general insignificance are highly diverse.

The most frequently cited reason why faith or religiosity does not play a role in the work with refugees was the assumption that such interventions by social workers are unnecessary. "They are so well organized among themselves; they don't need us to ask questions about their religious life." Furthermore, the 'resource religion' was simply used by the refugees and was experienced as helpful, even as a 'protective factor', for example, in connection with suicidality.

The time problem was one aspect that came up in all counseling centers, whether in asylum counseling within the community shelter, refugee and integration counseling, or migration counseling for adult immigrants. Time pressure, "we have to counsel non-stop", "no time to listen" or for a casual conversation was mentioned as an essential explanation as to why the client's religiosity did not matter.

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Therefore, the social workers' tasks were more or less limited to counseling and supporting in official matters. How the clients were doing beyond that was of secondary importance. In the case of trauma, depression, or similar illnesses, clients might have been referred to psychosocial counseling, where faith and religion could have played a more significant role.

Another reason given for the fact that religiosity hardly plays a role in the conversation between social workers and Muslim clients was that they assumed that the point of contact might have been missing here, that the knowledge about Islam was not enough to address it, or because clients see it as a private space for themselves.

Other reasons why religiosity did not play a role in social work with refugees were reflected in statements of individual social workers, for example, the language barrier, the lack of an external framework, or the risk of being experienced as proselytizing. Also, the missing knowledge on how religious a person is, the religiously and politically neutral conception of the institution, and the wish to avoid tiresome discussions about different beliefs were further reasons why the "topic of religion is left out".

Not in a single case, however, was it a directive from the respective employer. Neither Christian nor ideologically neutral institutions had given instructions in this regard.

8.2 Occurrence of Religion in Social Work

The situations in which religiosity or spirituality was brought up as a topic between the persons interviewed and their clients were primarily critical, making the people feel down. In counseling, this was the case when the social worker had done everything possible in terms of content, i.e., bureaucracy, and yet the problem at hand could not be solved. Then, with a 'look above', one of them referred to God as the only instance one could now still turn to, or from which help could still be expected, which according to him the clients understood and gratefully accepted. The social worker described the grateful reaction of the Muslims to his small gesture as follows: 'Their hearts open' and 'you can almost physically feel' that the clients feel good about his reference to their faith in God.

In working with the young refugees, faith also played a role when their situation was challenging. The social worker encouraged the young people concerning the help of Allah ("Allah helps you. You are not alone."), which was also heard and accepted by them because "for these people, he is the most important." They said, "okay, he helps me, [...] I can do it."

In contact with traumatized refugees, Muslim clients also reported that their faith in hopeless life situations supported them in refraining from suicide, for example, because this was 'not an option' in their religion.

In the facility for the most vulnerable, one of the contact persons referred to the faith of the refugee Muslims by promising them support through prayer – again, under challenging circumstances. The clients accepted this offer particularly positively and gratefully.

Encouragement concerning the prayer of their parents, such as "your parents pray for you", was also used by the youth's social worker to comfort and motivate them. He also tied in certain religious traditions of the young people to let them feel comfortable and at home in the foreign environment, for example, by saying grace in Arabic at the table when he was alone with an individual Muslim client.

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In the Initiative for Traumatized Refugees, the client's religion or spirituality was often asked about as a possible protective factor or resource in the initial interview. The special needs educator also appreciatively perceived this but did not further discuss it.

These findings show that in a social worker's contact with refugees outside of pure counseling settings (such as the residential group for unaccompanied minor refugees, community shelter for particularly vulnerable persons, and Initiative for Traumatized Refugees), where the contact between the two can be more intensive both in terms of time and personally, there were more opportunities to address religiosity. In this sense, one interview partner formulated: "So I, I bring it in where I feel it fits. And that is actually more in a one-to-one conversation." But "it is important to me that they are also doing well spiritually."

However, even in a counseling session after the essential things had been taken care of, the topic occasionally came up when there was still a short time left. Then it could certainly develop into a "really good conversation."

But in all conversations, it largely depended on the social worker whether religiosity was thematized. Because even if the topic was addressed, the social worker did not necessarily refer to it, as IP7 formulated, for example: "but I do not work with it that much."

The faith-related topics that played a role in the contact between social workers and refugee Muslims were, on the one hand, theological (also occasionally conversion to Christianity or the circumcision of boys), but more often practical (for example the different understanding of the roles of men and women in Islam, halal food or clothing restrictions) or merely organizational (like moving appointments because of Friday prayer).

8.3 Importance of Religion for Muslim Refugees

In examining whether the social worker or the client is more likely to bring up religious issues, the clients introduced a broader range of subjects without the social workers' intervention. These themes included essential faith topics, such as the young people praying in a seemingly hopeless situation, the clients accepting God's will even if they would wish for a different solution to the problem, or faith providing support in a challenging circumstance and preventing suicide. However, they also included topics such as the religious duties of prayer and Ramadan, including the social worker's invitation to break the fast and topics of particular importance in the new environment, such as halal food, circumcision, and conversion. Furthermore, some clients requested to learn more about Christianity and expressed their gratitude by wishing 'God bless you' to the social workers.

Most social workers attributed some importance of faith in their lives to the Muslims they worked with. In most cases, religion resulted in a positive function for their clients, namely as a source of strength, support, and meaning in difficult situations, orientation, support through prayer and mosque attendance, protection from suicide, and relevant community life.

The fact that religion could also have adverse effects, primarily on Muslim women, was mentioned by social workers concerning the religious community acting as a controlling authority. Thus, it was mostly about specific behaviors, such as wearing the hijab, or the appropriate conduct when dealing with a man, where the Muslim women were seen as either insecure or not acting freely, as they were expected to avoid the 'talk of men'.

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A social worker described another negative effect of faith on some clients as "becoming extreme in their views." For example, one client left Germany again to join the Islamic State (IS).

8.4 Importance of the Social Workers' Faith for the Topic of Religion in their Work

The only characteristic common to the social workers who referred to the religiosity of their clients, except for the Muslim social worker, was the importance of religion and faith in their own lives.

Of the eight non-Muslim social workers interviewed, for six, religion "actually plays a minor role", or "no longer plays a role" in their personal lives, which also applied to the topic of religion in their work.

For the two remaining interviewees, their faith now played a more significant role. One of them formulated: "Yes. I am actually a believer", and also regretted that due to his current extreme work situation, he had no time to live up to his claims as a Christian and as a church social service person by dedicating time to the people and listening to those who were often very severely off "because many are traumatized." Despite this exceptional time condition, he managed, through small gestures, to signal to his clients his responsiveness to this subject, which in turn was said to be received positively by them.

The other Christian said of herself that she "is an active part of a church community and tries to implement the values of the Bible and the Christian faith in [her] every day and personal life." In her work, this was shown in individual conversations as she spoke on her own initiative about faith, prayed for the clients, and made clear that it is important to her "that they are also doing well spiritually". From her experience, this fact was received positively and gratefully by the refugees.

The Muslim Social Worker argued that he believed in God but was not a "strong religious man." Although he participated in and respected religious traditions, he felt that he was a modern person who made his own decisions. Despite this attitude, he often addressed his clients' religiosity because he was well aware of the importance of faith for most Muslims due to his own Muslim background and used it in their favor.

9 Discussion

9.1 Role of Muslim Refugees' Religiosity in German Social Work

In work settings, where contact with clients can be both more intensive in terms of time and more personal, religious topics were thematized more often than in pure counseling settings. However, one interview partner showed that despite a tight schedule and fundamentally different tasks in counseling refugees, it is still possible to connect to their faith because it does not take much time ('look above'). When social workers, however, refer to their clients' faith, it, in turn, leads to a positive relationship with them because it reveals interest in their beliefs, and they feel understood.

On the other side, even in the settings with more intensive contact with the clients, it largely depends on the social worker whether religiosity is addressed, which can be seen in the community shelter for particularly vulnerable persons, or in one social worker's statement: "but I don't work with it that much", formulating her reaction to a client addressing his faith.

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As a result, therefore, it can safely be concluded that the religiosity of Muslim refugees in social work in the region of Lower Franconia plays the role which the social worker grants it.

In this regard, it does not matter which organizations employ social workers. A causal relationship was not confirmed, even if one might have anticipated a positive correlation due to church employers committed to Christian values and being aware of the importance of faith.

However, since both the basic understanding of social work in German-language theory (Dhiman & Rettig, 2017a: 7) and, increasingly, German society itself, are secular (Pollack & Müller, 2013: 12), which accordingly also applies to social workers, the low significance of religiosity in the work of the social workers interviewed is not unexpected.

If it is now mainly up to the social workers whether the topic of religiosity is taken up or not, they are, therefore, the pivotal point for answering the question: Which role should and could the religiosity of Muslim refugees in Germany play in social work?

9.2 The Potential Role of Muslim Refugees' Religiosity in German Social Work

To many Muslims, their faith is of great importance. Their religiosity or spirituality means hope, confidence, and security, which is a source of strength, an essential resource, and a positive coping strategy in adverse life situations. In the case of flight, faith often has a stabilizing role and very often is, besides the family, the primary resource for emotional support (Scholte et al., 2004: 592; Lutz, 2016). In this sense, Lutz (2016: 42) calls religions the "treasury of modernity" that reveal the resources of meaning, salvation, and world relationship. However, for Schubert & Knecht (2015: 6), it is significant that clients go beyond only knowing their resources. Not until they are actively used can they be experienced as substantial and supportive, especially if they are emotionally significant, which can be assumed for religious and spiritual resources. Here, the social worker can be of help.

If now the individual reality or subjectivity of the persons is considered as an essential principle of action in social work, if the way of life and perspective of the addressees has to be the reference point of social work assistance, and if at the same time, the benefit of religiosity for the individual is demonstrated, social work cannot help but become religion-sensitive, and religious competence is necessary for the social work profession (Nauerth, 2017: 133; Lob-Hüdepohl, 2017: 162).

Therefore, religion in social work should not only play the subordinate role it has – due to the primarily secular social work professional socialization, and in some cases its marginal importance for the individual social worker – but awareness should be created among (future) social workers for its often great importance for the refugees. This is in line with Straub (2020: 354), who promotes the extension of social work to a "bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective."

9.3 Requirements for a Greater Role of Religiosity in German Social Work

If the social workers' role is so pivotal, awareness should be created among them for the importance of spiritual or religious aspects for the majority of Muslim refugees. Support of the clients in their challenging situation has to embrace both bureaucratic matters and empathy for their condition.

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Hochuli Freund and Hug (2017: 52) name the "thematization of questions of meaning" as a task of social-pedagogical support, so that

> "existential feelings of being at the mercy of others and the search for a foothold do not have to be split off and acted out, for example by belonging to a political-radical, violent or religious-fundamentalist group".

It has been shown that social workers who either care about their own faith or are aware of the supportive effect of faith for believers are more likely to integrate it into their work. However, since the personal faith of individual social workers can only be addressed voluntarily – for example, by church employers – the only starting point in the education and training is to create awareness of the importance of faith for many people.

This, in turn, should play a role – given the increasingly plural character of society – for all social work students (see also Dhiman & Rettig, 2017b: 225), but also, to a greater extent, in specifications for working in the field of migration and flight. Additional training opportunities and the promotion of the same by employers are equally crucial for the many social workers who already work with refugees.

9.4 Necessary Competencies

These requirements of a greater role of religiosity in social work comprise of acting competencies, knowledge, and attitudes. For Freise (2018: 375), 'acting competencies' embrace, among others, hospitality for religious groups of refugees and promotion of interreligious dialogue. This could include providing prayer opportunities or, where desired, supporting the celebration of religious holidays. One of the interviewees also mentioned the importance of joint interreligious activities and spiritual exchange, for example, by establishing contacts between church and mosque communities (Kolbe, 2021: 11). However, it can also serve as a template for interreligious activities, for instance, in the shared accommodation for those in particular need of protection.

What can also be assigned to action competencies is the ability to look at the spiritual "forms of consciousness and action" of the refugee clients and, if necessary, to support them in determining which of these are also helpful in the new environment and which may need to be changed (Mennemann & Röttgers, 2018: 427). It was also confirmed by some interview partners that there are questions in this regard among some clients.

An important aspect here is the fact that most refugees come from social systems where the individual's decisions have to be balanced with the family or group. That means culturally sensitive ways that take into account the importance of families and communities for the coping procedures of Muslim refugees are crucial (Fischer et al., 2010). Furthermore, it has to be decided individually if individual- or group-related forms of intervention are best in the respective situation.

Already, the interview partners mentioned a whole range of attitudes that are crucial for social work with refugees, like openness to other people, sincerity, respect, curiosity, interest, and motivation to learn, authenticity, self-reflexivity, as well as the perception of the clients in their individuality, intercultural sensitivity, and appreciation.

Literature furthermore suggests that social workers need to be able to examine and provide information about their personal religious, spiritual, or ideological background (Freise 2018: 375). This includes once more the question of meaning and the handling of

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this in work with clients. The goal should be sensitivity and attentiveness to these questions, recognizing the refugees' search or crisis in this regard as best as possible, dealing with it respectfully, offering support, or referring them to appropriate professionals.

Social workers furthermore should know and cultivate their own sources of strength and maybe learn meditation or a meditative attitude in order to prevent burnout and to become open to the other persons (Freise, 2021: 273).

The knowledge that social workers should have to give clients' religiosity the importance that is necessary and supportive begins with basic facts such as the five pillars of Islam, the six principles of faith, the significance of the Prophet Mohammad, and the holy scriptures of Islam, especially the Quran. An insight into different faiths within Islam and their specifics are to be included. Knowledge about religious duties and critical basic rules of Islam awaken understanding for particular behaviors of Muslims. Essential holidays and the significance of Islam in individual countries, cultures, and individuals' lives also provide valuable insights. Furthermore, it is beneficial to gain an understanding of which behaviors or characteristics can be attributed to religion or culture (Qantara, 2017; Cecil et al., 2018: 104) and what connection there is between Islam and some of the issues associated with it, such as terrorism. Finally, it should be mentioned that there is by no means 'the Islam', that there is instead a very different lived and pronounced understanding of Islam in numerous countries, cultures, and family associations (Krüger, 2019: 109). Therefore, the individual persons with their respective understanding of faith must always be the starting point in concrete social work.

In addition to this knowledge about Islam, social workers should also gain an insight into resilience research with particular attention to the religiosity of Muslim refugees and possible coping strategies, protective factors, and the like, which sensitizes them to dealing with the faith of Muslims in their work, especially in difficult life situations, and gives them concrete points of reference that lower the inhibition threshold to address it in their work.

All theoretical insights can serve as a basis for the concrete application, thus linking up again with acting competence. 'Intercultural counseling' is a keyword in this regard that encompasses knowledge of cultural differences and concrete possibilities for action to counter them, both in the counselor-client relationship and in questions that arise for the Muslim client in a non-Muslim culture.

Since some interviewees mentioned that they did not even know whether the respective clients were religious or not, a 'spiritual anamnesis' (Pandya, 2018: 1402), for example, the iCARING Brief Spiritual Assessment Protocol by Hodge (2018: 484) could be helpful. This semi-structured spiritual history tool is recommended to understand client's needs and resources better. However, experience has shown, for addressing spiritual needs, personnel has to be adequately trained, which unfortunately is usually not the case (Balboni et al., 2014). Therefore, university departments of social work and human service organizations should educate social workers to apply spiritual assessment and faith-integrated interventions ethically which is also a suggestion of Cecil et al. (2018) from their study with German social workers.

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9.5 Further Possibilities of Social Workers to Support the Religiosity of Muslim Refugees

Since the tasks of social workers are not limited to the micro-level, it would also be conceivable – in the sense of the ecological model according to Bronfenbrenner (Salkind, 2006) – to work at the macro level to sensitize politicians to perceive the religion of refugees as a resource. As World Vision has formulated concerning children (Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 50), it is also necessary to support adults in the practice of their religion, for example, by further promoting the training of imams or by not putting obstacles in the way of enabling meetings of Muslim communities.

On the meso/community level, initiating multi-religious projects, for example, joint support for refugees, mutual visits, and getting to know places of worship, is another way to build bridges for and to Muslims. Thereby, multi-religious cooperation can become a positive experience for Muslims who had to flee due to violent conflicts with a religious background, where different religions connect and do not separate. Also, multi-religious cooperation might help migrants who are not used to religious freedom to get used to this 'unfamiliar idea' (Lyck-Bowen & Owen, 2019: 10-12).

Most refugee work in Germany is provided by faith-based organizations, where religion is usually not discussed to show that they are there for all people, regardless of their religious affiliation and at the same time not to be accused of proselytizing. However, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Wilkinson (2018) state, that it is more dangerous not to ask people about their religion because this can lead to avoidable mistakes. Moreover, it risks that this aspect, which is often vital for people, is 'ignored, overlooked and ghettoized' to conform to the 'mainstream'. Instead, governments and organizations should provide 'safe spaces' and opportunities for refugees to express their religious, spiritual, or cultural needs and, if necessary, their need for support in this area, which can then also be responded to. Especially in faith-based organizations, social workers should also be allowed – indeed, for these, it might be even crucial – to provide refugees with religious or spiritual services or refer them to communities doing so. Only in October 2021, the Christian churches issued a Joint Word titled "Making Migration Humane" ("Migration menschenwürdig gestalten"), in which they advocate pastoral care for people in need, regardless of religion and ideology (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz and Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2021). Clear guidelines can counteract proselytization (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Wilkinson, 2018, 10f.).

10 Limitations and Further Research

As far as can be seen, this study is the first to examine the role Muslim refugees' religiosity plays in social work in Germany. However, since the survey of social workers took place exclusively in four towns in the region of Lower Franconia and was limited to nine social workers, these findings cannot be generalized to social work in general. Further research could examine the occurrence of (inter-) culturality and -religiosity in social work curriculums and provide a helpful basis for curriculum designers in individual universities. The concretization of the various points of contact for religiosity in social work would also be an essential step to show social workers the possibilities for action in different work areas with refugees.

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11 Conclusion

This research examined the role that the religiosity and spirituality of Muslims who have fled to Germany play and could or should play in the work of Lower Franconian social workers. These questions were answered based on a literature review and qualitative research.

The statements of nine social workers who work with refugees in various settings made it clear that religion plays only a minor role in social work for multiple reasons. Most often, faith or spirituality was addressed when the refugee was in a critical situation. Besides that, it mainly played a role in practical questions or also in imparting knowledge. Even if clients repeatedly brought up religious topics, they were not always taken up by the social workers, although most of the social workers attested to their clients a certain kind of faith or importance of their faith.

Because religiosity in social work with refugees plays the role which social workers grant it, it is either brought in by social workers for whom faith is also essential in their personal lives or by those who are convinced of the supportive effect of faith for others, even if this does not apply to themselves personally. However, the remarkable commitment for their work with refugees suggests that with greater awareness of the importance of religiosity for the refugees' lives and its supportive effect, a willingness to incorporate it into the work could be achieved.

These research results fit in well with the current state of research, according to which religiosity and spirituality have so far played only a subordinate role in social work, but a growing awareness was identified that they should be given a broader space and that there is also a need for this among refugees.

Through the study, new insights were gained into the reasons for the insignificance of religiosity in social work. These insights offer various starting points at different levels for giving religious and spiritual topics greater significance, for example, in the training and continuing education of social workers, in the staffing of individual institutions, or by encouraging employers not to exclude spiritual topics.

The current hesitancy to address religious topics with their clients can be explained by a dearth of sensitivity for the importance of the subject and a lack of background knowledge and possibilities of application. This could be achieved through appropriate preparation during studies or intensive further training.

The competencies that social workers would have to bring with them relate to all areas of social work, such as attitude, knowledge, and action competence.

Adequately trained social workers could provide critical support to religious Muslim refugees – especially in challenging situations. Since this is a recognizable goal for both institutions and social workers working with refugees, future as well as already active social workers should be sensitized and trained accordingly.

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PRACTICE REPORTS

Critical Social Work and Unaccompanied Refugee Minors' Social Inclusion: An Example of Critical Best Practice[1]

Aikaterini Oikonomou[2] and Agapi Kandylaki[3]

Abstract

This article presents an example of critical best social work practice with unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Based on a critical perspective, it focuses on social and community work interventions in the first reception centre, established in Greece, before the huge influx of refugees in 2015, aiming to support, empower and achieve social integration of the hosted youths. Drawing from the first author's narrative, recalling her practice experience in the field as an 'intervening researcher', the article discusses the actions taken through a critical perspective. Within this perspective, social work practice discussed here focuses on meeting the needs of the youths, defending their rights and empowering them, while building bridges with the local community to achieve their social inclusion. A critical perspective is used as an interpretative framework of analysis. It thus also underlines the critical role of the local community towards the integration of unaccompanied minors.

Key Words:

Critical social work, unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers, refugees, reception centre

1 Introduction

The movement of unaccompanied minors to Europe is not a new phenomenon, but the emerging current conditions are such that action urgently needs to be undertaken in order to address significant issues of child protection (Breen, 2019). The increasingly critical conditions, evolving by continuous inflows and the urgent necessity to manage the conditions of accommodation and integration of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the host countries, stress the need to revise interventions. Within this framework, the social work role needs to be redefined in accordance with the policies concerning the management of the refugee phenomenon. In order to respond to the increasing needs of the incoming population and especially that of unaccompanied minors, social workers are expected to provide social protection and empower them so

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they are able to plan their lives anew. They are invited to take a critical stance towards the policies adopted and implemented, to reflect on their own attitudes and perceptions, to re-evaluate their strategies and to readjust their practice and actions, aiming at protecting human rights and promoting social justice (Fook, 2016).

Social work, as an applied social science, is called upon to face and cope with new data and situations, which are constantly created in the social environment, with social change as its focus. The global and political context developed by financial crises, climate change, the emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic, forced migration and refugee rights, along with the restructuring of welfare and care systems for refugees, and especially for unaccompanied minors, are among the most pressing issues that social sector professionals worldwide are faced with (Ferguson et al., 2018; Kamali, 2015). In an era of global transformations and massive movements of people – and within the context of the national institutional frameworks of immigration policy and its inability to manage the large numbers of children and young people "on the move" – it is important to reconsider social work interventions, which currently focus on responding to the needs for living conditions, care and integration, as well as providing appropriate services to unaccompanied minors. Submitting policy proposals that may revise the focus of the interventions at an institutional level is crucial.

Within a human rights perspective, it is urgent that social work responds to the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers specific needs in terms of reception and assistance conditions in the host country. All should have access to welfare, protection, education and health services. Priority should be given to the rehabilitation and treatment needs based on psychological and other traumatic experiences they have endured. In all cases, their best interests need to be determined and appropriate measures should be taken to protect them (Spyropoulou, 2016). However, social workers' interventions in receptions centres and hostels for unaccompanied minors in Greece are very specifically determined. Their responsibilities are described in detail by International Organisations. However, due to deficient policies and insufficient funding (Nikolopoulos, 2018), social workers are frequently unable to meet the real needs of the people. Thus the need for the revision of social workers' role is essential. Examples of critical best practice may contribute towards this direction.

This article attempts to highlight the importance of critical social work in supporting and strengthening the resilience of refugee minors through a case study of a critical best practice. It further reveals the factors that contribute to their successful settlement and integration in the host country, going beyond the limits of a "deficit approach", focusing on the role that a local community can acquire.

2 Critical Social Work

An extensive literature review concludes that critical social work is a dynamic approach with multiple interpretations (Adams et al., 2009; Allan, 2003; Baines, 2007; Campbell, 2003; Carniol, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Hick & Pozzuto, 2005; Leonard, 2001; Mullaly, 2007). Its central point is critical reflection, which encourages questioning the way of thinking and acting. It can lead to alternative ways of interpreting and dealing with social problems and structures. The starting point of the critical

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approach is the admission that social work practice aims to enact social change and tackle social inequality (Campbell & Baikie, 2012).

Critical social work is based on connecting all critical theories and it emphasizes on the statement that society has been constantly changing, and it is thus subject to revolutionary changes (Payne et al., 2002). Based on critical theory, social work takes critical thinking as its starting point, which helps professionals connect human behaviour with the given environment in which they operate in (Giannou, 2012: 3). At the same time, the main pursuit is the promotion of social justice (Healy, 2001).

As critical social work is based on critical thinking, its characteristic elements are observation, the ability to define the problem, "boldness" in thinking, the readiness to challenge any dogma or prevailing opinion and the equal and in-depth investigation and analysis of the content of all parameters (Seelig, 1991). After all, "critic" means to judge, to call into question (Liddell & Scott, 2006).

The purpose of critical thinking and analysis in social work is to enable professionals, through self-awareness, to connect human behaviour with the specific environment in which people operate in order to question and change those prevailing relationships in society, which create and perpetuate injustice and inequality (Dominelli, 2002). Through critical thinking, ideas and beliefs which are considered as undisputed facts are challenged, and stereotypes, prejudices and racist and sexist attitudes may be revealed. It may also be clear how they may be intergenerational. Self-awareness is a necessary skill for professionals to understand how these social processes are internalized by the individuals and they subsequently shape each individual's way of thinking and acting (Ioakimidis, 2011; Kallinikaki, 2011). For critical social work, this understanding is particularly important, as its effectiveness is judged by whether it manages to change anything that is passed down from generation to generation and works against people (O'Sullivan, 1999).

This presupposes a continuous process of both investigating and questioning on behalf of professionals, as well as criticizing the ways in which their daily practice in the area and the domain in which they work and operate is indeed part of the intended social change. It is important for professionals to seek an informed and global collection of information and an insightful analysis of data in regards to the relevant conditions for each issue, which helps them to recognize their "own" agreement or their "opposing opinion and attitude". Furthermore, it is essential for social workers to critically reflect on the preconceptions and stereotypes they may have adopted in order to arrive at a perception that is as global and "objective" as possible, free from prejudices and discrimination. The recognition, critical acceptance and synthesis of different ideas and new situations leads to the development of a global perception of the 'whole' (Brown & Rutter, 2008, as cited in Kandylaki, 2018: 13-41).

Social workers' understanding of the nature of conditions and changes, as well as the complexity of the environment in which they intervene, the social structures, processes and practices, which have produced oppression, is essential. At the same time, promoting the rights of vulnerable groups, social inclusion and equal opportunities is critical (Lacroix, 2006; Östman, 2019). They should be able to commit, reason and make informed decisions by being able to explain the "what" and "how" of their practice (Fook,

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2018, as cited in Kandylaki, 2018) and being able to continue developing methods and strategies for their best interest. By doing so – and after appropriate evaluation, consideration and utilization – they can plan their intervention in direct collaboration with young people, based on their individual needs. Professionals' critical thinking and critical reflection may support their attempt to address institutional and structural discrimination and reveal the causes of oppression related to "therness" in terms of race, social class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture and sexual orientation. These may relate to social work practice which promotes empowerment and resilience strengthening, liberation and improvement of individuals' quality of life, particularly of those living in vulnerable and oppressed conditions. Social work actions may also promote societal changes, social justice and social inclusion (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] & International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014). This is why the assumption and position regarding the promotion of social change presupposes that the reflection and "critical" consideration of social work lies at the heart of its identity (Fook, 2016).

3 The Centre for Unaccompanied Minors as an Example of "Critical Best Practice"

The question addressed is whether an intervention can be considered as a "critical best practice" and whether similar actions or methods may be applied successfully in other relevant cases, especially when they occur at another point in time. It may also be of interest to examine whether the subject of interest noticeable in one case, can represent the phenomenon in general (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Case studies, on the other hand, may provide insight into the study of a social phenomenon and thus contribute to the establishment of a theory relevant to its understanding and management (Stake, 1994). The hereby presented case study of "The Anogeia Reception Centre for Minor Asylum Seekers" allowed for an in-depth research and analysis (Creswell, 1998). It thus enabled the recognition of an example of critical best practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1970). The Reception Centre was the first to operate in Greece and is run by the National Youth Foundation at the facilities of the Anogeia Unit of Crete since July 2000. It is considered an example of "critical best practice" in the hosting, accommodation and inclusion of minors, following Ferguson's (2003) criteria, for a number of reasons: First of all, critical theory was used as an interpretive framework in the present practice. Throughout the research process and during the various stages of its completion, the social worker was given the opportunity to reflect within a supervision process on the phases of integration of unaccompanied minors and the contribution of social work to it. Interviews carried out as part of her thesis research with professionals employed in reception centres throughout the country, as well as with a number of refugees who were accommodated as unaccompanied minors in Anogeia fifteen years after their first arrival in Crete revealed the process of successful integration of these young people to Cretan community. It has also been clear that a critical consideration of the practice developed in the centre was essential to their integration in the local community. By illustrating many years of experience, with its strengths and weaknesses, the dissemination of knowledge and practice of support, empowerment and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors within the host country becomes evident (Ferguson, 2003). Furthermore, the Centre, in its early days of operating, was nominated by the (then) High Commissioner in Greece, as a *"Model Centre, which should be an example for other*

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European countries" (UNHCR, 2004a, as cited in Oikonomou, 2020: 416), and it was included in the *"Good Practices for hosting refugee minors"* report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN Human Rights Commission (Tsovili & Voutira, 2004; Petit, 2005, as cited in Oikonomou, 2020: 429-434), for creating experiential knowledge, i.e. "knowledge produced by practice, actions and procedures" useful for similar centres.

Furthermore, it has provided a framework for trainee social workers' internships, and it has developed cooperation with academics in Greece and elsewhere, as well as with many cultural associations and various social bodies, facilitating, thus, the possibility of implementing intercultural social work based on human rights and anti-oppressive approaches in practice. The minors who were initially hosted in the Centre were interviewed fifteen years later (see Oikonomou, 2020), and they underlined the importance of their experience in the Centre for their integration in the local community. They highlighted the period after the completion of the Centre's hosting program. It is also important to state that this project refers to a socially vulnerable group and it is based on the promotion of social justice and the right to a better quality of life, free from violence, abuse and exploitation (see Kandylaki & Kallinikaki, 2018: 1569).

4 The First Seps – A Personal Narrative

The writers of this article were involved in this project from different roles. One, the first author, worked as the first social worker at the Anogeia Centre from 2001 to 2007, and she has thus contributed to the organization and operation of its Social Service, while the other, through supervision, assisted on critical reflection and on linking theory to practice. It is important to mention that from the very first day at work, the first author was faced with a strange situation, as she unexpectedly met a group of 25 smiling individuals, "mature" young people, instead of the namely small, "helpless" children, she expected to see. The "isolated" geographically, but always "in the midst of things" community of Anogeia was the first area to host unaccompanied minors in Greece. The first reception and hospitality at the Centre for both the minors and the social worker was particularly "warm" and "unique". From the very first moment of her stay there, she noticed the love and interest shown by all of the staff for the children and at the same time she realized the desire and everyone's need for another ally, and especially a social worker, who will support their effort to accommodate and integrate in the local community.

Initially, what was important was to study and get to know the general context of the institution, i.e. the supervisory and funding bodies, such as the National Youth Foundation, the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity and the European Refugee Fund, the implementing body, i.e. the Anogeia Unit, as well as the staff and everyone's role in it.

It was necessary to study and seek information about the refugee issue and the target group in general. It was also essential to get to know the specific guests in person, i.e. to get to know where they came from, what were the reasons that forced them to leave their homeland, how they moved, what they thought and how they felt, what difficulties they were faced with, what they expected, etc. It was simultaneously important to familiarize with the local community and the agencies that were active in it and to

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explore the perception and attitudes of the locals regarding the hosting of unaccompanied minors.

Most importantly, however, it was essential for the social worker to perceive, shape and define her professional role. Through the tasks and responsibilities assigned to her, she was expected to realize not only "what" she had to do, but more specifically "how" to approach persons and the arising matters, especially when there was no previous experience in this field. On one hand, she tried to distinguish the position of social work in the intervention with unaccompanied minors and to rely on the principles of human rights and the promotion of social justice, while she reflected critically on her practice (Sue, 2006). These helped her to choose the strategy and the interventions she would follow. A question frequently raised was whether she should treat the youths as "victims", focusing on their past, deficits and dysfunctions, or whether she should count on them as "active participants" in decision-making, in meeting their needs and in the process of mediating to promote their rights by enhancing their advantages and strengths (Corcoran, 2012; McCashen, 2007; Saleebey, 2014). The evaluation of the interventions showed that both were done depending on where each young person stood and what their personal capabilities and needs were. An individual action plan was designed for everyone based on their particular needs. The group processes and meetings, on the other hand, aimed, among other evolving issues, to identify each person's strengths, while it simultaneously focused on working on their presented weaknesses. Most importantly, it was centred on helping them realize their personal and individual responsibility for the future (Nair, 2013; Wade et al., 2003).

An important condition was to gain the trust of each individual. The social worker's previous long-term work experience with another vulnerable group, the "Roma", and the study of relevant literature had informed her that, until a relationship of trust was established between individuals, due to their previously experienced frequent violent and oppressive incidents from people in authority positions, there would be a great deal of suspicion on the youths' part towards people who hold a position of prestige and authority (for this, see Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2007; McDonald, 2016; Mitchell & Baylis, 2003, Okitikpi & Aymer, 2003, Wade et al., 2003). To gain trust and invite them to open up, respect, unconditional acceptance and genuine interest and concern for the minors were essential (Arnold & Collins, 2010-2011; Nair, 2013; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). Therefore, a full, fixed program with a variety of activities and commitments in every contact and meeting was scheduled in partnership with the youths, while consistency in delivering on what was agreed each time, as well as direct proposals for new ways to meet their needs, shaped the overall collaboration.

Spending time to get to know them and developing a framework of intimacy was essential. Meetings even outside working hours and the institutional context, through walks in the village and visits in various shops and cafes of the village, by watching and participating in the youths' activities at the local stadium, etc. contributed to developing a good professional relationship (Campbell & Baikie, 2012; Kohli, 2007). Meetings outside working hours also helped the locals meet the 'new guests' and contributed to developing a sense of familiarity between them as well as a mutual acceptance. Another important fact that facilitated the acceptance of the young people by the residents was the love and affection of the staff members of the Centre, who originated from Anogeia and the surrounding area. They treated the minors as their own children, and

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automatically joined in their daily routine, becoming part of their lives and their families. This was a tangible example of trust development and acceptance by the rest of the village residents (Berry, 1991; Schippers, et al., 2016).

4.1 Communication and Cooperation with Agencies / Opening up to the Community

One of the first basic actions for the integration of minors was communication with all the agencies of the local community where the centre belonged. A first meeting aimed at getting to know each other with the representatives of the agencies and examined the prospect of entering into cooperation. Health and education services came first. An excellent cooperation was established with the local health centre. Each and every minor on their arrival they were referred to the Health Centre to do a preventive medical check-up. From then on, they had the right of free medical treatment, either at the Health Centre or at the General Hospitals of Heraklion. Following the frequent contacts of the social worker, the medical and administrative staff of the hospitals became soon acquainted with some of the minors, who accompanied others, on a role of a mediator in the absence of an interpreter. They were trained as centre assistants and they catered immediately to the medical needs of the younger newcomers.

The social worker came into contact with local community schools, i.e. the village middle and high schools. In sequence to the first meeting to get to know each other, many other regular meetings with the principals and the educational staff followed, to deal with the process of school enrolment of the minors, monitoring their progress, dealing with the emerging difficulties and obstacles and raising awareness of the school community about their inclusion. It is worth noting that some youths, with diligence and perseverance, excelled in their classes, even though they learned the Greek language during their stay at the Reception Centre. The school inclusion and attendance of some minors in high school was followed by a first direct action between the guests and the local students. During the Christmas season, the youths organized a party at the Centre, where the students of the 3rd grade of the local High School were invited, as they were the same age as those residing at the Centre.

There was also an excellent cooperation between the Refugee's Centre social worker and the one of the Open Centre for the Protection of the Elderly of Anogeia, which from the beginning was very positive in terms of hosting minor refugees. After a joint proposal and agreement between the two, a carnival party was organized for the first time in Anogeia with the cooperation of all local bodies, which, apart from the creation of the floats, it included common theatrical and dance events. This action gave the minors the opportunity to get closer to residents of all ages, to get to know each other, to exchange cultural elements, to show off their artistic skills, to receive acceptance and feedback, as this successful project required the willingness of all participants of several afternoon hours for rehearsals on the premises of the Elderly's centre. In addition, the fact that the minors took over the artistic curation of the street chariots and the scenery of the theatrical events contributed to the enthusiastic acceptance and recognition by the inhabitants. During the same period, their actions also coincided with their participation in the cultural events in Aridaia, a city located outside of Crete in the Northern Western part of the country, where the long-hour rehearsals of the actions (songs, Afghan and Cretan dances, theatrical acts), which were planned in advance, where presented. By travelling to participate in this festival, the recognition and acceptance of their effort

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helped both the bonding of the team and the development of confidence between the minors, the social worker and the rest of the staff.

4.2 The Contribution of University Institutions

Another important step that was taken immediately after the start of the social worker's cooperation with the Centre, was to include a cooperation agreement with the Social Work Department of the Technological Educational Institute of Crete (currently, the Hellenic Mediterranean University), in which she was also working as a part time lecturer and had the opportunity to supervise students on their practice placement. The students collaborated with community agencies and contributed to essential acquaintance, interaction and mutual respect with the residents by tackling prejudices and promoting the social integration of minors.

The Centre also accepted student social workers from other countries for their internship through the Erasmus program, which made both parties happy, as the students had the opportunity to come into contact with unaccompanied minors and have a unique experience. The minors, on the other hand, had the opportunity to expand their contacts, feel accepted and enrich their program with new actions. In the context of this collaboration, professors and researchers from abroad visited the Centre while "Art Therapy" seminars were also held. In addition, the Centre offered the possibility of internships to students from the Department of Psychology of the University of Crete, thus providing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

4.3 Cooperation with Organizations and Institutions outside the Community

Collaborations with agencies from the other prefectures of Crete, contacts with schools of primary and secondary education, with the Immigrant Shelter in Chania, with theatre and other groups of the country led to the exchange of visits with schools. The youths' participation in anti-racist festivals, cultural celebrations and cultural camping, Olympic Games camps, art workshops, music workshops related to Afghan music, friendly soccer matches, health education seminars by NGOs, UNHCR world refugee days, etc. was critical for the integration process. At the same time, regular educational excursions were organized throughout the island, where young people were given the opportunity to get to know the place that was hosting them, to interact with other people, but also to have fun.

4.4 Local Community Support and Rehabilitation

Seasonal employment in agricultural and cultural work, or permanent employment in shops and cooperatives in the community for those above the age of 17, and their access to education in local schools, as well as their participation in the local football team and their learning of dances, musical instruments and martial arts from volunteers, were significant for the integration process. They were also invited to local celebrations, ceremonies and events by the residents, with some of whom they had developed very close, family-like, relationships. All of the above contributed to the minors feeling safe. They were, thus, helped to develop special abilities and skills and believe in the possibilities and integration prospects they had (Berry, 1991; Kohli, 2007; Tonheim et al., 2015; Schippers, et al., 2016).

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A serious deficit on the part of state institutions was the care for the future of minors when they came of age and had to leave the Centre. This created insecurity (McDonald, 2016). Thus, the social worker's particular concern was to empower them and strengthen their resilience, taking care as much as she could of any details related to their vocational rehabilitation during their adulthood (Hodes et al., 2008; Kohli, 2007; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Rigby, 2011; Wade et al., 2012). Although a proposal was sent to the Labor Force Employment Organization for their youths' inclusion in professional training and employment programs, there was not much success, as this was not provided for in the legislation at the time. Yet by looking for local advertisements, the social worker helped them in finding jobs in the nearest cities of Heraklion and Rethymnon, as well as in the local community of Anogeia.

4.5 Difficulties Encountered

Throughout this project, there were many difficulties related to the institutional and legislative framework and many problems were encountered by the minors due to psychological transitions and the emergence of crises due to their traumatic past and their removal from their family and homeland. They often experienced frustrations, mainly from delays in granting political asylum (Kohli, 2007) or from negative decisions (rejections) related to their asylum applications. A continuous agitation was frequent due to the insufficient outlet for utilizing free time which was offered by the infrastructures, while tensions and frictions between them evolved in any cohabitation and especially among teenagers.

Listening carefully while using crisis intervention skills and assisting youths to vent additional frustration were some of the skills used within counselling social work sessions. The aim was also to assist them in setting their own goals and empower them towards a new start in their lives through an individually scheduled programme for each and every one of them. Planned group work sessions aimed to develop a sense of "belonging", increase their feeling secure, their co-operative skills and group cohesion, as expanding solidarity and mutual support among youths was a clear purpose.

In cases, which were difficult to manage and needed psychiatric care, support by the hospitals of Heraklion was asked and a continuous close co-operation with psychologists and psychiatrists was established. These mental health experts regularly met some youths, until a psychologist was hired on a permanent basis at the Centre.

The efforts made by professionals and volunteers, as well as the role of the local community, were decisive in strengthening the youth's resilience, empowering them and contributing to their successful integration in the community.

4.6 The Embrace of the Local Community

Anogeia may be a closed and remote mountain community, but in relation to an impersonal big city, it managed to offer the minors a first safe and protective environment and the possibility of developing authentic relationships that they need so much. After the great suffering and the countless dangers and traumas they went through, the Anogeia local community embraced them. The acceptance and love of the residents towards the guests dispelled their suspicion and softened any resistance. They gradually healed their trauma and pushed them to regain trust in themselves and

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people; the local residents offered them again the hope they had lost, a new vision and the supplies they needed to build their lives responsibly and freely in the future. This did not happen immediately, but it developed gradually. The initial persons in their new life, who were residents of Anogeia, the workers at the Centre, the local priest, as well as renowned musicians of the village, acting as "integration mediators", took them in their homes, invited them along, alongside with the locals, to all social events of the community (local cafes, weddings, parties, etc.) and asked them to join them in the local sports clubs, etc. This event softened any resistance on behalf of the locals and, following the "unwritten rules of hospitality" that want "your guest to be our guest", they followed the example of their fellow villagers, and embraced them all, as if they were their own children. A typical example of how the residents of Anogeia treated minors as real family is the following: A woman villager, who was a member of the Centre's security staff, offered a handmade silk scarf[4], which is a precious gift with a special symbolic value in Cretan culture, to two of "her children", (as she used to call them) for a wedding and a funeral. One scarf, she offered to a boy who was killed in a car accident. She placed the scarf in the coffin and said: "This is to accompany you on your long 'journey' back to Afghanistan." The other scarf was given as a wedding gift for 'good luck'. She put it on the groom's shoulder during the wedding ceremony, where she also became the couple's best woman. In both cases this woman has not only embraced the youths with a spirit of hospitality but she has also "adopted" the role of a Cretan mother, originating from "Anogeia", as she performed the traditional custom of offering a handmade silk scarf to "her own children".

The acceptance of minors by the local community is also demonstrated by UNHCR's choice to organize the World Refugee Day celebration in 2004 in Anogeia in order to honour the work of the Reception Centre. As the then High Commissioner stated in a press conference (UNHCR, 2004a, b in Oikonomou, 2020), *"Hospitality in Anogeia is no accident: the warmth with which the local community has embraced the children is a bright example of humanity and culture* (UNHCR, 2004b in Oikonomou, 2020: 419) *[…] The Greek government and Greece have given the unaccompanied refugee children a place to call home, here in Anogeia".* (UNHCR, 2004a in Oikonomou, 2020: 417).

This was also verified by a quote from an interview with the youths hosted in the Anogeia Reception Centre to the High Commissionaire (UNHCR, 2004a in Oikonomou, 2020). Their gratitude could not be better expressed than by arguing the children's own "reasoning":

> "We were children without a family, without a country, without a future. However, our God had taught us to always see a bright sun behind the clouds. And this sun was for us your country, Greece that hosted us. Here we got a warm embrace, security, people around us who trust and love us. Now we sleep without nightmares and bomb blasts to disturb us. We loved this place, we learned your language, we learned to make friends, to trust people

[4] The modern knitted scarf (sari), or bolidi, with its dense, teardrop-like fringes made its appearance in the 20th century. Its fringes symbolize the many years of Turkish rule in Crete and the sadness and mourning caused by the holocaust of the Monastery in Arkadi in 1866. It is woven in two embroidered colors: white and black. White is usually worn on happy occasions, such as weddings and christenings, while black shows valour, pride and mourning (Choustoulakis, 2021).

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again and to gain their appreciation every day. We got our own courage back and we dream about the future: a house, a job, a homeland" (UNHCR, 2004a in Oikonomou, 2020: 417).

5 Reflective Thoughts on Social Work's Role with Unaccompanied Minors

Social work interventions based on the principles of human rights and social justice with the holistic use of the methodology of social work, influenced by a critical perspective and anti-oppressive methods, empowerment, strengthening of resilience, emancipation and integration of unaccompanied asylum seekers, formed a positive climate in the Reception Centre which was also established by staff members. Locals were occasionally invited to various events in the Centre and, thus, alliances with institutions and services within the local and wider community were created. Practical, day-to-day support and creating routines for minors helped promoting a sense of "coherence". The emphasis on "coming into terms" with the youths' traumas, when they felt ready, provided the context for a more emotional space with them, i.e. the realm of "connection" based on a strong and lasting relationship with the development of strong bonds and "coherence" (Kohli, 2007).

The social worker was able to develop an honest relationship with them, by presenting real and genuine interest, patience, consistency and feedback (Arnold & Collins, 2010-2011; Nair, 2013; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). Gaining their trust helps them to break their silence, which was frequently used as a form of resistance (Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2006). There is frequently strong suspicion on behalf of minors towards social workers, as they are often perceived as "authorities" (see Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2006; McDonald, 2016; Okitikpi & Aymer, 2003). Youths' reluctance to trust professionals often leads to silence (Kohli, 2006). Empathic and congruent listening and respect for their personality, principles and values, as well as simultaneously recognizing and apologizing for potential mistakes and weaknesses on her part, led to a strong professional/counselling relationship and encouraged the social worker to deal with the countless difficulties emerging. Furthermore, their increasing resilience emerging from their competence of surviving and their will to live was a compass to the working process. Most importantly, it should never be forgotten that they are young people and they thus should be treated as any other young person who needs support and empowerment to rely on their own strengths and move forward in their lives.

Working in partnership, empowering them ("power with" clients) rather than controlling them ("power over" clients), and treating them as experts in their own lives was essential. Empowerment allowed them to feel part of the decision-making process on serious issues that affected them, taking responsibility for their survival rather than just being considered as passive victims (Nair, 2013; Wade et al., 2003). The fact that these young people decided to leave their homelands at an early age to seek a better and safe future in a foreign country should be recognized as a "strength" (Corcoran, 2012; McCashen, 2007; Saleebey, 2014). This approach, instead of focusing on the problems of minors, seeks to understand and develop their strengths and abilities, which can turn their lives into something positive through encouragement and by focusing attention on their strengths and competences, thus, pushing them to develop a positive image of themselves (Saleebey, 2014). This framework places emphasis on the discovery,

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affirmation and enhancement of the individuals' capacities, interests, knowledge, resources and goals (Cederbaum & Klusaritz, 2009, in Mathe, 2018).

The feedback received from this whole venture has been possible as contact and communication have been maintained with several of the minors, who are now scattered in many countries all around the world. Some have even gone back to Afghanistan. They still communicate with the social worker, they talk about the families they have created, about their work, about their life and still refer with nostalgia to their overall experiences of what they had lived in Anogeia. At the first opportunity, when it is possible, they visit Crete and Anogeia, specifically "It is as if we are returning to our own homeland", argued one of them (Oikonomou, 2020).

Many scholars (see Gray & Elliott, 2001; Schippers, et al., 2016) argued that the successful settlement and integration of unaccompanied minors and the assurance of their mental health in the host country are critically associated with the process enabling them to become members of the so-called "host community" and their developing of a sense of "belonging". A prerequisite to this is that they are given the possibilities and opportunities to receive care and feel safe through their relationship with adults, to share their stories and experiences through the development of acquaintances and friendly relationships, to participate in decision making for their steps to maturity and their social inclusion to education, activities and networking, which enhances their skill development, mental empowerment and health prospects (Schippers, et al., 2016). Berry (1991) reinforces this view, arguing that people are able to successfully integrate into a society and they are considered resilient to change when they are able to rebuild support and care networks over time. After all, after leaving their homeland, permanent residence in one place also provides the stability that children and youths seek and need (Kohli, 2007: 143).

Social support and social relationships have a decisive impact on the psychosocial well-being of youths and adults. Those who are more socially isolated or less socially integrated are consequently less, socially, psychologically and physically healthy. Social support can involve practical help and assistance in the daily life of the unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. It is also essential in providing emotional support and security. Minors who have been exposed to situations of risk as they have been on the move, away from their parents (or they may not have parents at all), benefit especially from the presence of supportive adults in the host country in terms of their successful integration into the local society. The development of such a secure relationship and bonding can help them regain their trust in themselves and in others (Tonheim et al., 2015). Making them feel as 'children and youths' first of all is critical and essential, and it was a primary consideration in the Anogeia Reception Centre. As the minors hosted in the Centre felt like the 'staff's own children', they still consider the Village as their second homeland and, even as adults, they always return to it happily.

The following phrase of an adult refugee fifteen years later, which captures his love for the place that hosted him, is quite unique, yet typical of the way the hosted minors feel: *"I will not tell you in a few words, I will tell you in one word. When people ask me where I'm from, I say that I am of Afghan-Anogeian-Cretan origin"* (Oikonomou, 2020: 224).

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6 In Conclusion

Social work with unaccompanied minors emphasizes dealing with the emerging challenges and focuses on strengthening youths' resilience with genuine concern, love and empathy. Through information providing, careful empathetic listening and working in partnership, social work addresses young people's needs. Furthermore, it involves empowering youths and promoting social justice and social change while developing professionals' critical self-awareness, mediating children's and youths' rights within the hosting community and managing the emerging problems and difficulties presented (Fook, 2003; Kandylaki, 2009). The mediating role is particularly essential in a period of increasing immigration and neoliberal reorganization of national welfare states, which creates new conceptual, ethical and practical challenges for social work practices (Jönsson & Kojan, 2017: 301-317).

During this period of emerging complex, and constantly changing, conditions, both at the institutional and at the socio-political-economic level, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are faced with ever-increasing new needs that require immediate management. Social workers are called to respond to new challenges, which require the critical evaluation and reconsideration of previously acquired knowledge, the exercise of criticism and evaluation of the environment in which they appear and the enrichment of existing processes with new overall planning and practices (Fook, 2018).

Based on critical social work and critical reflection in regards to their feelings and prejudices, their strengths and weaknesses, their developing knowledge and skills, cultural competence and sensitivity for the target group, social workers need to intervene holistically by making an overall contribution in meeting the needs of the children's daily life, recognizing the traumas of the past in order to make them feel that they really belong in the new country so that their goals can be achieved in the future.

In this context, social workers need to develop abilities and skills for honest and open communication, to listen carefully and highlight the "reason" of minors, planning and acting with them to improve their living conditions, to create and maintain honest relationships that respect the uniqueness of the "other" (Campbell & Baikie, 2012), to develop "cultural competence", recognizing the values and attitudes of those served, understanding and showing respect, both to their particular culture and to their history and experiences, as they belong to, and are members of, a wider oppressed group (Kandylaki, 2009; Thompson, 2001). Most importantly, however, they should never forget that unaccompanied minors are, above all, "children" and "youths" with all the characteristics and particularities of those specific age groups.

"Cultural competence" does not simply refer to new knowledge and skills in terms of cultural otherness, but presupposes the reconsideration of social work in terms of its goals and values, as well as the development of a more reflective attitude towards experiences, assumptions, the skills of professionals and feelings related to stereotypes and prejudices (Sue, 2006). Knowing and recognizing their personal values and attitudes, through self-awareness, significantly determines the integrity and quality of their interventions (Kallinikaki, 2011).

The development of skills and the utilization of all intervention methods of social work, following an objective assessment of environmental conditions, as well as social

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workers' networking with institutions, services and initiative movements aimed at the collective assertion of rights for the empowerment of vulnerable social groups, lead to their more effective intervention. By taking into consideration the role that the local community can play in the integration of unaccompanied minors and their access to local agencies and services, social workers' develop networks with informal community leaders to increase awareness-raising and defend social justice. It is also essential to come up with suggestions for policy changes, which are, in fact, necessary in order to redefine their role and their responsibilities in the field (Oikonomou, 2011).

The current system finds it difficult to respond effectively to the questions and dilemmas that arise in regards to child protection, and professionals are called upon to reflect on the conditions for the inclusion of unaccompanied minors, to raise new concerns and submit sustainable proposals. Social workers can be actively involved in policy changes and interventions, research and direct practices in order to effectively contribute to the self-determination of unaccompanied minors. By being active in developing strategies of resistance to neoliberal practices that favour control over the active participation of those directly concerned and by simultaneously promoting active professional reflection and maintaining an emotional connection to experience (Beddoe, 2010; Bogen & Marlowe, 2015; Williams & Briskman, 2015), social workers may become actively involved in mainstream debates about organizational goals for unaccompanied minors and political asylum seekers. This may help to support institutions' survival in competitive environments. The forced movement of populations and their integration, especially that of the unaccompanied minors, continues to be one of the most challenging global issues that social work is faced with. Individual empowerment along with collective responsibility and advocacy of social justice are essential for social work with unaccompanied minors as it has been exemplified and shown in detail hereby, through the presentation of the case study of the 'critical best practice' of the Anogeia Reception Centre.

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QRP

From Helplessness to Self-help: Asylum Seeker-led Organization as a Platform to Address COVID-19 Support Policy Gaps in Hong Kong[1]

Ka Wang Kelvin Lam[2]

Abstract

This article describes, how a platform provided by asylum seeker-led organizations was used, to cope with challenges, faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from Hong Kong, one of Asia's major cities, demonstrates the importance of asylum seeker-led response to inadequate and exclusionary government aid provisions. Although the pandemic exacerbated the existing plight of asylum seekers in Hong Kong, their resilience was instrumental in developing the asylum seeker community. Because they were excluded from most pandemic assistance measures, helplessness forced asylum seekers in Hong Kong to "self-help." They proactively utilized the platform provided by the Refugee Union, an asylum seeker-led organization in Hong Kong, to request and gather resources for themselves and advocate for better policies. These asylum seeker-led initiatives not only helped them cope with crises like the pandemic, but also opened up opportunities for them to reach out to other local communities and advocate for themselves, leading to greater social inclusion in the long run.

Key Words:

Asylum seekers; asylum seeker-led organizations; pandemic; refugees; resilience

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everyday life for everyone, but the impact on lives and livelihoods has not been the same. For forced migrants, this pandemic has meant facing one disaster after another. Having fled persecution, conflict, violence, human rights abuses, or social upheaval in their home countries, the pandemic became their next struggle for survival. While much of the literature focused on the challenges faced by refugee or asylum seeker communities in developing regions (Bukuluki et al., 2020; Martuscelli, 2021; Moyo et al., 2021), little is known about such challenges in developed regions. This may be because people in developed regions are immune during the pandemic to problems faced by those in developing regions, although this is not necessarily true. In Hong Kong, one of Asia's largest cities, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties faced by the local asylum seeker community. Asylum seekers were excluded from most pandemic assistance efforts and had little place to seek help. While existing literature focuses on the challenges refugee or asylum seeker communities

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face, we have limited understanding of how they respond to these challenges (in other words, their "agency"), during turbulent times.

This article contributes to understanding how refugees or asylum seekers have used the platform provided by refugee- or asylum seeker-led organizations to cope with the challenges faced by them during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on experiences in Hong Kong. The author conducted ethnographic observation at the Refugee Union, an asylum seeker-led organization in Hong Kong, between January 2020 and April 2022. He has been volunteering at this organization since July 2018. At first glance, the findings from Hong Kong highlight the importance of asylum seeker-led response to the inadequate and exclusionary provision of government assistance. Excluded from most pandemic assistance efforts, asylum seekers in Hong Kong proactively used the "self-help" platform provided by the Refugee Union. They used social media to reach out to other local communities, while strict infection control measures prohibited group gatherings. They also used tactics such as online crowdfunding for donations from other local communities and electronic petitions to advocate for better policies. The Hong Kong experience has again demonstrated the roles of refugee- or asylum seeker-led organizations in addressing gaps in services, reaching out to other local communities, and encouraging refugees or asylum seekers to participate in policy discussions that affect them.

2 The Situation of Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong before the Pandemic

Forced displacement is a major global challenge today. In 2021, about 89.3 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, mainly due to conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations, and social upheaval. Nearly half of them were displaced from their country of origin, such as Syria (6.8 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.4 million), and Myanmar (1.2 million) (UNHCR, 2022). Hong Kong is one of the many places where forcibly displaced persons are seeking refuge. According to official figures, about 15,000 people are currently seeking protection in Hong Kong (The Standard, 2023). According to an asylum seeker informant, some 50 percent of them are from South Asia, 30 percent from Southeast Asia, and 10 percent from Africa. While Hong Kong is a signatory to the 1984 United Nations Convention Against Torture, it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Hence, Hong Kong is merely a "way station" for asylum seekers (people awaiting a decision on their application) and refugees (people whose claims is substantiated and who are awaiting resettlement). In this article, the term "asylum seekers" refers to both asylum seekers and refugees. The author chose this terminology due to the fact that the majority of individuals seeking protection in Hong Kong are asylum seekers. Although asylum seekers apply for protection upon arrival in Hong Kong, many remain stranded in the city for decades due to the lengthy legal process.

Although Hong Kong is one of the wealthiest places in the world, there is no financial security for the local asylum seeker community. For many asylum seekers, Hong Kong is another struggle for survival. Asylum seekers in Hong Kong are generally prohibited by law from working and rely solely on a limited monthly stipend of HK$3,200 (US$408) to survive. The stipend is composed of HK$1,500 as a rent subsidy, HK$1,200 as a food subsidy, HK$300 for utilities, and HK$200 for transportation costs. Children receive half of this amount. The Social Welfare Department has contracted the Hong Kong International Social Service, an international nongovernmental organization, to provide these stipends (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). The stipend is one-sixth of the local median wage (Census and Statistics Department, 2022). In Hong Kong, the cheapest apartment without

windows costs at least HK$3,000. The stipend alone is far from enough to survive in Hong Kong, one of the places with the highest cost of living in the world (The Standard, 2022). Therefore, these asylum seekers often seek help from churches, charities, and other local aid organizations in the form of donations.

3 Challenges Faced by Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong during the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the difficulties faced by asylum seekers in Hong Kong. The first wave of the pandemic in Hong Kong began in January 2020, and the number of infections and deaths has fluctuated since then. Hong Kong encountered five waves of outbreaks from 2020 to 2022. At the time of writing, over 2.8 million infections and 13,400 deaths have been recorded (HKUMed, 2023). For a city with a population of only 7.33 million (Census and Statistics Department, 2023), these infection and death figures are significant. However, this is not the first time Hong Kong has faced large-scale epidemics. In 2003, the SARS coronavirus outbreak resulted in nearly 1,700 infections and 300 deaths (Hong Kong Free Press, 2017). Hong Kong residents learned from this experience and became cautious. Many put on their face masks and tried to buy food, essentials, and protective gear, causing shortages and skyrocketing prices. As confirmed cases increased, people began panic buying, fearing that stricter infection control measures would be put in place, which has been the case in recent years. For the people in Hong Kong, the worst-case scenario meant a lockdown and mandatory testing, similar to that in mainland Chinese cities (Financial Times, 2022).

As fear grew, rumors spread. Instead of worrying about getting infected, asylum seekers in Hong Kong first had to worry about staying prepared. Some asylum seekers the author spoke with at the Refugee Union center recalled having little access to essentials such as food and protective gear, especially face masks, during the early stages of the pandemic. Panic buying was not the only reason that prevented them from getting these items; restrictive refugee policies also played a role. In Hong Kong, asylum seekers receive their food money in the form of “ration cards,” that cannot be exchanged to cash. With these cards they can only shop at the ParknShop supermarket (one of the largest supermarket chains in Hong Kong). From asylum seekers’ perspective, the ration card policy reflected a sense of mistrust. It also limited their ability to buy goods from cheaper places, such as street markets. The inadequacy of the ration card policy was most evident during the outbreak. Panic buying led to a shortage of food and other essentials in supermarkets, resulting in asylum seekers finding only empty shelves in supermarkets and little to eat despite having food cards.

However, the local asylum seeker community was most affected, as they were excluded from most assistance and had nowhere to turn for help. Under normal circumstances, asylum seekers could turn to aid organizations in the neighborhood, but many of these organizations were temporarily closed due to the pandemic, especially as the number of infection cases increased. Asylum seekers attempted to contact their caseworkers assigned by the International Social Service for assistance, but several complained that their caseworkers did not return their calls. This was particularly the case during the fifth wave outbreak (between December 2021 and April 2022), when chaos reigned in Hong Kong: Public facilities and health services were overwhelmed with over 10,000 confirmed cases per day. The local asylum seeker community was also not eligible to receive relief

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packages from the Hong Kong government, such as the consumption voucher program, because they did not have legal status. Although COVID-19 is non-discriminatory, the Hong Kong government did not consider asylum seekers for vaccination until several months after the program began (South China Morning Post, 2021).

4 From Being Helpless to an Attempt at "Self-help"

The state of helplessness promoted asylum seekers in Hong Kong to stand up for themselves. In February 2020, as the second wave of the outbreak approached, dozens of asylum seekers, who were also members of the Refugee Union gathered and submitted their petition to the Social Welfare Department. They urged to the Hong Kong government to increase support to help them cope with the unexpected challenges of the pandemic. Similar policy advocacy activities also took place in 2014, when the group pressured the local government to improve the rights of asylum seekers and successfully requested the Hong Kong government to increase aid. This movement also led to the formation of the Refugee Union, which became the first and only asylum seeker-led organization in Hong Kong (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). Although the group did not achieve the expected results this time, as no changes were made to the support levels, the asylum seeker community in Hong Kong still saw a silver lining in the form of neighborhood support.

Since group gatherings were not allowed due to the worsening pandemic, Refugee Union members used social media to reach out to other local communities and continue their political advocacy activities. They wrote about the hardships faced by many asylum seekers in Hong Kong and how they were marginalized, and the content was later published on the group's social media pages and official website. The group also used some tactics for the first time, such as an online crowdfunding campaign and an electronic petition calling for the abolition of the ration card policy. The former was launched during the pandemic to raise money in neighborhoods so that asylum seekers could buy food and other essentials at stores where these items were still available.

These attempts at "self-help" led by the asylum seeker community receive public attention. An increasing number of people became aware of the needs of asylum seekers in Hong Kong and were willing to help them with donations of money and goods or to share their stories. "We see more and more new faces stopping by our center. There are more faces of individual donors and more faces from local residents who are Hong Kong Chinese," one of the leaders at the Refugee Union said. The Refugee Union center stayed open when other local relief organizations were not in service, becoming a place where donations were distributed and collected. Some other groups and individuals chose to support these asylum seeker-led initiatives through virtual means, such as the online crowdfunding campaign and electronic petition.

5 Concluding Thoughts

In this article, the author uses the experience in Hong Kong to show how asylum seekers used the platform provided by an asylum seeker-led organization to address the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Asylum seekers in Hong Kong proactively utilized the platform provided by the Refugee Union to request and gather resources for themselves and to advocate for better policies. These findings are consistent with previous studies that found refugee- or asylum seeker-led organizations often function as alternative service providers for refugees or asylum seekers when official

government support is inadequate (Bloch, 2002), and as platforms for them to connect with other groups and engage in issues in the host context (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Although the pandemic inevitably aggravated the hardships faced by asylum seekers in Hong Kong, their resilience became an important factor in the development of the asylum seeker community. These asylum seeker-led "self-help" initiatives not only helped them cope with crises like the pandemic, but also expanded the channels for them through which they could reach out to other local communities and advocate for themselves, with positive long-term effects on their social inclusion.

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