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Disappointed, discouraged, determined: (De)Motivation and unaccompanied refugee youths in Portugal

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Departamento de Antropologia

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To those seeking their place in the world
May we all come home

Acknowledgements

I would like to express gratitude to the people in my life who shared this part of the journey with me. First and foremost, it goes to my interlocutors, both refugee youths and professionals making up their network. Without them, this research simply would not exist, and I am grateful to the CPR staff and the youths under their care, as well as everyone else I had the pleasure of talking to, who took the time out of their day and spent it on sharing their stories and reflections with me.

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Thank you to my family and friends – words can't encompass the depth of my appreciation. Whether we're near or far, separated by country borders or not, we are all in this together, always building our life projects in parallel – and building each other up.

No person is an island. Thank you for not letting me be one, either.

Resumo

Esta tese aprofunda o tema da jornada dos jovens refugiados não acompanhados rumo à inclusão em Portugal, com especial enfoque na questão da motivação como força motriz não só das suas ações, mas também das ações dos membros da comunidade de acolhimento. A motivação é influenciada pelas expectativas que os refugiados e a comunidade de acolhimento têm uns dos outros e da sua situação, bem como pelo choque dessas expectativas com a realidade. As expectativas são criadas no contexto sociocultural e estão intrinsecamente ligadas às experiências vividas por cada indivíduo, o que significa que o que a comunidade de acolhimento pode considerar ser o melhor curso de ação possível para um refugiado, este pode não considerar útil ou mesmo aplicável, o que leva a uma desilusão mútua, desmotivação e desligamento do processo de integração.

A tese baseia-se em investigação de campo realizada em 2023-2024 num centro de acolhimento para menores refugiados não acompanhados em Lisboa e é apoiada por investigação teórica sobre o conceito culturalmente formado de infância e motivação, bem como pela visão geral do processo de asilo e integração dos jovens refugiados em Portugal e na Europa, com as suas questões comuns que atuam como obstáculos.

Os melhores resultados em termos de inclusão parecem ser alcançados através de uma assistência informada, centrada na pessoa e culturalmente sensível, e da colaboração entre os jovens refugiados e os profissionais da rede de asilo.

Abstract

This thesis delves into the topic of unaccompanied refugee youths' journey to inclusion in Portugal, with a particular focus on the issue of motivation as the driving force behind not only their actions but the actions of members of the host community. Motivation is influenced by expectations that refugees and the receiving side have of each other and their situation and the clash of those expectations with reality. Expectations are created in the sociocultural context and are intrinsically linked to each individual's lived experiences, meaning that what the host community may consider to be the best possible course of action for a refugee, the refugee might not find helpful or even applicable, which leads to mutual disappointment, demotivation, and disengagement with the process of integration.

The thesis is based on field research done in 2023-2024 in an unaccompanied refugee minors shelter in Lisbon and is supported by theoretical research on the culturally formed concept of childhood and motivation, as well as the overview of refugee youths' asylum and integration process in Portugal and Europe with its common issues acting as obstacles.

The best results in inclusion appear to be achieved through informed, person-focused, and culturally sensitive assistance and collaboration between the refugee youths and the professionals in the asylum network.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Every year, many people are forcibly displaced both within countries and across borders as a result of violence, persecution, human rights violations, or for other reasons. Data from UNHCR shows that in 2024, of 123.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 49 million (39.8%) were below 18 years of age[1]. According to UNHCR, in 2023, out of a total number of 55.700 children arriving in Europe, 35.500, or 64%, were unaccompanied[2]; Eurostat shows that in 2024 there was a similar number of unaccompanied refugee minor asylum applicants in Europe (33.180), and 205 of whom (0.6%) were in Portugal. Among those, the majority was reported to be boys (29.935 in Europe and 190 in Portugal), with girls making up 3.235 and 10 respectively[3,4].

Per definitions provided by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, unaccompanied children/minors 'are children <…> who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so'[5]. A refugee, according to the 1951 Refugee convention, is a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it'[6].

There are some difficulties present in providing numbers that accurately reflect the situation regarding the movement of unaccompanied refugee minors, as such movement may be irregular or involve smuggling networks; moreover, even the number of filed asylum applications shows trends rather than definitive numbers due to e.g. possible backlog in national asylum systems[2b]. But even taken at face value, the numbers are staggering and certainly worth paying closer attention.

The UN defines 'youth' as 'persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States'[7]. While a lot of the literature I draw from for my research in this paper focuses on unaccompanied refugee minors specifically, I am going to use the term 'youths'

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[1] UNHCR: https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics
[2a,b] UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110153
[3] Eurostat:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyunaa/default/table?lang=en%22%20%5Ct%20%22_
blank
[4] The number discrepancy refers to a handful of cases with gender marked as 'unknown'.
[5] CRC: https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/GC6.pdf
[6] UNHCR: https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees
[7] UN: https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/faq.html

throughout as a way to encompass young refugees on either side of the age of majority, considering that while, by definition, unaccompanied refugee minors arrive in Europe and begin their asylum application process while still underage, their journey towards inclusion in the host society doesn't stop the moment they turn eighteen, nor does the legal transition from 'refugee minor' to 'refugee adult' transform them into completely different people with no relation to their past experiences. The refugees in my fieldwork were people between seventeen and twenty years old at the time I did my research, having lived in Portugal anywhere between a few months and three years, and so I find the term 'youths' to be the most fitting way to refer to this age group.

I went into my fieldwork with an open mind and little prior knowledge regarding the situation surrounding unaccompanied refugee minors and youths in Portugal. While I have worked with refugee minors before in a different country, they came there with their families and had a somewhat different set of issues to focus on; and as a recent immigrant myself (only a few months at the start of my fieldwork) I was and remain far from an expert on Portuguese customs. The project I joined was not directly related to the resulting topic of my thesis, but I observed and conversed and participated, allowing circumstances, opportunities, and attention to guide my journey. From that, a curiosity slowly coalesced and prompted further research both in theory and in practice. Thus, my research question stands as follows:

What factors impact motivation on unaccompanied refugee youths' path to inclusion in Portugal, and what can influence these factors?

The general issue of (de)motivation seems to boil down to the disconnect between expectations and reality. And so, to expand upon this topic in relation to refugees and thus to answer my question, I will first be giving context to the cultural concept of minors, then expanding upon the topic of motivation formation with a focus on education as the most relevant setting for refugee youths, particularly through the lens of expectancy value theory, task value, and relevance. Then, I will be delving into the asylum application process and the tensions and frictions that arise from and around it, and finally offering my reflections. But first of all, I would like to talk about the fieldwork I conducted, as the crux of this thesis and the source of knowledge I got firsthand by talking with refugees and professionals and sharing space and experiences with them.

CHAPTER 2

Field Research

2.1. Overview of the Location and My Motivation

Image 1. View of the CACR shelter and its remote location (source: Google Images, 2025)

My fieldwork was mostly carried out over the period from October 2023 to August 2024, with a few additional interviews in the following months. Most of it occurred in CACR in Bela Vista, Lisbon, in a shelter for unaccompanied refugee minors. CACR (*Casa de Acolhimento para Crianças Refugiadas*, Centre for Refugee Children) was inaugurated in 2012 and has over the years received several hundreds of unaccompanied refugee minors, mostly boys, most of them being 15-17 years at the time of arrival (Roberto, Moleiro, Lemos 2020). Built on an incline, the shelter consists of two parts: the older building, containing the dormitories on the top floor and the administrative spaces on the ground floor, and the newer expansion with a spacious stairwell leading down to the level with the kitchen, the dining hall, and the space for bicycle storage and drying racks. Because of the incline, one can enter the shelter on the ground floor on one side of the building, and exit on ground level again one floor below, through the dining hall, which despite facing south is heavily shaded. Outside, there is a basketball area, and over the time of me visiting the place they added a pergola with sitting space underneath, and a small inflatable pool for the summer. One of the corners has been claimed by a group of stray cats, and some of the staff members and youths take care of them.

On the administrative floor, aside from the rooms reserved for the staff and the bathrooms, there is a computer room – one I've spent a lot of time in over the course of my fieldwork – and a recreation room with a carpet, a couch, a bean bag, and assorted toys. I have not been to the dormitory floor, but I've seen the heavy wooden shutters on the inside of the windows to block out the sunlight, and one of the boys living there at the time told me there used to be six people to a room – and according to the staff's data there were about thirty youths living in the shelter during the 2023-2024 school year, but at the time of the interview (October 2024), as there were only about five people living at the shelter, each got their own room.

I initially started coming to CPR as an assistant to Prof. Cristina Santinho on her project. My role at the time was to conduct art workshops with the intention of creating space and facilitating discussions like immigration, Europe, culture, racism etc. through creative means. I submitted my application for this task and believed myself to be a good fit for several reasons. First, I hold a Bachelor in Fine Arts and have spent most of my life actively engaging with art and creativity. Second, I have worked with refugee minors before, during my stay in Germany where I volunteered at a youth centre, overseeing activities, keeping a positive and welcoming atmosphere, and helping out with school homework and general information on life in Germany. My charges were mostly girls from Somali and Syria, having come to Germany with their parents and trying to adapt to the drastically new culture, and while I couldn't necessarily relate to their difficult journeys or cultural backgrounds and the clash that being in a Western country brought on, I could relate to struggling with feelings of uncertainty about present and future and not knowing how to approach the finer cultural aspects that would be obvious to a local but not so much to an immigrant or a refugee.

Third, before coming to Portugal and enrolling in the Master program, I spent over a year working as a therapist for young children (age 1.5-3.5 years) with the autism spectrum disorder, using the principles of ESDM (Early Start Denver Model). This model encompasses improving all categories of skills of child development like play, fine and gross motor skills, and cognitive skills like sorting by colours and shapes, but also leans strongly on developing communication, which includes not only speech development, but engaging with adults and peers on a non-verbal level with shared eye contact, gestures, active involvement of self or invitation of others to participate in games, and collaboration. As ESDM is geared towards an age where the main type of activity is play, the method leaned heavily on exactly that, which was greatly supported by creative means, from learning what steps go into drawing a house to dancing together on a trampoline to collaborating on a roleplaying game. It was also a very non-invasive style of therapy, meaning that my parallel goal as a therapist, next to teaching the child the skills I had to teach, was making sure that the child felt happy and safe and was having fun with me, as opposed to being scared or stressed or upset, as the emotional state impacts the capacity to learn and retain. In an ideal situation, the session would largely consist of us engaging together creatively in various tasks, exchanging positive impressions, and learning something new and useful in the process.

All of these experiences led me to believe that I had something to offer to the project at CPR, and that was how I got involved and continued with the workshops over the course of several months.

2.2.   Methodology, Ethics, Interlocutors

The bulk of my fieldwork was conducted in form of workshops which gave me the opportunity for participant observation and spontaneous conversations which would at times flow into semi-structured interviews if I got the impression that my questions were welcome and appropriate. Aside from that, I also got to spend time together with the youths during a couple of events at the shelter, an outing to the museum, and individual projects and classes that I facilitated. Additionally, I separately conducted several semi-structured interviews with a few of the youths, the staff of CACR and InPulsar, and a lawyer working *pro bono* cases involving unaccompanied refugee children. Permission was obtained from CACR staff to converse with their charges and to take notes and photos of them and their creations, and during every session I asked for permission from the youths themselves. Everyone I have conducted interviews with was asked for permission to be recorded; in one case where a boy refused being recorded and openly expressed discomfort at the idea, I took notes. To minimise the risk of stress and revictimisation, I avoided direct unprompted questions about the youths' past, choosing instead to let them guide the conversation. If they offered what I interpreted as an invitation to ask for more context, I did so, but overall, as much as it was in my power (as in, as much as they hopefully didn't feel like they *had* to reveal anything to me) I let them decide when and what to disclose about their past, and their thoughts and feelings.

Privacy is an extremely important matter, especially when it comes to younger individuals; for this reason, everyone is given pseudonyms in this thesis, and despite the permission to take photos and regardless of my interlocutors' age, all faces are blurred. Ages of the youths are listed according to the data from February 2024, shared by the staff.

The number of the youths coming to the workshops fluctuated over time for many reasons. Their participation stood at the end of the equation with the values, among others, of available free time and energy, interest in the workshops, and a slowly developing positive relationship with myself, which I would try to encourage by projecting warmth and paying attention. Some would come consistently, some sporadically, some once or twice and then never again for months, and the ones I saw and interacted with the most were:

- Salma, a seventeen-year-old girl from Morocco. She tended to be cheerful and joked around a lot during sessions with one of her friends, Ali, but still created thought-provoking pieces with metaphorical expressions. Salma was also one of the few youths at the shelter who would come over to our table and apologise and excuse herself from the workshop if she couldn't be present. As I wanted the workshops to be as low pressure as possible, I never demanded their presence or pushed for explanations for absence, so her choosing to do that anyway showed her consideration.

- Ali, an eighteen-year-old boy from Egypt and a friend of Salma; during our sessions, he mostly interacted with her and an intern who acted as our interpreter from Arabic, and while he seemed to be among those who were somewhat suspicious of creative activities, he appeared to gain some satisfaction from engaging in them, especially during the first session.

- Christiane, a seventeen-year-old girl from the Republic of the Congo; a soft-spoken girl with contrastingly bold statements and a sly smile; we spent a lot of time together working on a creative project with just the two of us, so I got to know her better than most, and while some of her opinions contradicted mine on a personal level, I always enjoyed getting glimpses into her perspective.

- Abed, a nineteen-year-old boy from Afghanistan; he moved out of the shelter soon after our sessions began to live in a shared apartment covered by Casa Pia but continued coming to the workshops when he had the time. Always unwaveringly enthusiastic and attentive both to instruction and to detail. I met up with him several times after the conclusion of the workshops, and it was always unfailingly exciting to ask him about his life in Portugal as I knew he had a lot going on and would be happy to share.

- Bakary, an eighteen-year-old boy from Gambia; another interlocutor I spent a lot of time with, as I was providing weekly computer literacy classes. He was shy initially though gradually came out of his shell, albeit I don't believe he ever grew to trust me beyond what was necessary. But his general friendly disposition and desire to learn allowed us to spend a lot of productive time together.

- Nyang, a nineteen-year-old boy from Gambia as well; quiet and serious, applying himself to creative tasks with diligence even when it seemed like he wasn't initially seeing a point to them. He referenced his journey to Europe a lot and spoke about returning home in the future; his art was usually themed around fishing.

- Anita, a twenty-year-old girl from Benin; once I started doing the computer literacy classes, she came to the first couple of sessions, but unfortunately our language barrier was too high to surpass in something so technical. However, she readily engaged with the photography workshops, especially as they let her spend time with her boyfriend doing something fun.

- Oumar, a seventeen-year-old boy from Senegal; his was another case of a language barrier too prominent to scale, but that did not deter him from coming to a majority of the sessions. As far as I could tell, to him it seemed to be a break from the routine and a chance to do something the results of which ultimately didn't matter, so while he had a mellow disposition in general, he always seemed to be in a better mood by the end of a workshop.

- And finally, Amin, a nineteen-year-old boy from Senegal and Oumar's friend — they could often be seen together and sat next to each other during the workshop, quietly chatting and

laughing about something. I never got to learn much about Amin, and he seemed fairly reserved overall but appeared to appreciate my praise of his creations.

2.3. Fieldwork conducted

It is worth mentioning that as I joined the project after it had already begun – Prof. Santinho informed me that there was a meeting beforehand where everyone sat in a circle and introduced themselves. It also included a short presentation of the project and its goals. I am certain that having this session played a role in establishing some initial connections and evaluating each other, and albeit I am used to jumping into working with someone without preliminary introductions, missing this meeting put me somewhat at a disadvantage.

For the very first workshop that I did, dating to late October 2023, I elected to go with something simple yet with room to grow, for the purpose of giving both sides the chance to meet each other without the stress of a rigid framework or a demanding task, and so the first workshop was about playing with ink: drawing abstract shapes with brushes, fingers, and pieces of string, stamping the paper with sponges, folding it to create symmetry, and enhancing the resulting image later by drawing on it with pencils or markers. There were no strict guidelines given, just an invitation to play with the material and see what comes out of it, though it was specified that should they wish to work on specific topics, or maybe try to express something that represented them (as a more advanced task), they were welcome to try.

There were eight youths present at that first session, with an intern providing some interpreting for Ali who only spoke Arabic, and one of the workers checking in on us regularly. It was an October evening and our slot was set from 6 to 8 PM, as before that time the youths were said to have classes, and 8 was their scheduled dinnertime. It was already dark outside, the overhead lamps were providing yellow light, and one of them wasn't working. We were allotted the space in the dining room, around a long table covered with a plastic cloth and a bit unsteady on uneven legs. I can't remember if the large heating unit in the corner was already on and blasting hot air at us with a loud constant hum, but it would definitely become relevant in the later sessions. Towards the end of the session, the kitchen staff got to preparing for dinner; the kitchen was separated from the dining area with a half-glass wall with some of the windows cracked open, so the noise of pots and pans and cooking was added to the ambience.

All in all, objectively speaking, it wasn't an optimal setup, sensorially overwhelming, with everyone crammed around the table and talking over each other, and us sitting next to them or standing over them in an attempt to oversee and guide the process, with the rattling from the kitchen and the light that washed everything but yellow out of the paints, not to mention the variety of languages spoken

and the miniscule overlap that they had. Instructions had to be translated to as many languages as we could, a phrase often passing through two translations before reaching the recipient, and it both took a lot of time and interrupted the fluidity of the workflow. This left some of the youths present largely to their own devices as they either didn't require a translation and were happy to work on their own and/or translate to their peers, or required comparatively more time to understand the instruction and follow it. The language barrier led to a noticeable shortening of instructions and their simplification, as I tried not to say something that would be difficult and time-consuming to translate (especially considering the noise and busy atmosphere where we couldn't necessarily perfectly hear each other), and the fact that we required extra minutes to deliver the instructions meant that those minutes were taken away from active working time.

Overall, according to staff, the youths who were present also wanted to be present and to participate, although in practice there seemed to be a measure of discrepancy, as some did engage with varying degrees of enthusiasm while others sat back with their hoods pulled low over their faces and strings pulled tight, and while I tried to signal a non-threatening and welcoming disposition with the nonverbal means at my disposal (like smiling and making noises of approval of what they were doing, if anything), the inability to communicate more clearly was keenly felt.

The disseminated instructions were also met with varying reactions. Where some would ask a clarifying question or try and get to work, others would repeatedly ask what to do; when they drew, they would draw specific images either from memory or by looking them up on their phones and trying to copy. It seemed that they were genuinely confused by the idea of 'play', seeing it as not worth engaging with when there was no clear idea of the result – or, possibly, wary of what we the newcomers would do with what they create, as at least one of them asked me if we were psychologists aiming to analyse them. This was an understandable suspicion, as unaccompanied refugee youths come into contact with many unfamiliar adults who play a part in determining their status in the system, so the risk of inadvertently divulging some kind of potentially important information and having it analysed by us would naturally be a reason for disengaging. Moreover, when asked about their past experiences, some admitted to never having drawn before and to finding the idea of play unnecessary. Already at this stage, I was prompted to consider and compare what constitutes a minor in different cultural contexts, how being a refugee impacts developmental paths of youths, or a possible combination of both.

Nevertheless, most of the youths ended up creating something by the end of the session, although it is unclear where each of them would fall on the scale between becoming genuinely involved with the process and doing something for the sake of being left alone afterwards. Some of them engaged skeptically and reacted with some degree of irony or disbelief to my vocal approval of what they were working on; others seemed to engage enthusiastically, asking me additional questions, requesting

materials, or showing off their works unprompted and proud to pose with them for a photo, like Salma who ended up covering her sheet of paper in messy black with a thumbprint-sized red circle in the middle, commenting that it represented the warmth and love for and of her family amidst all the dark.
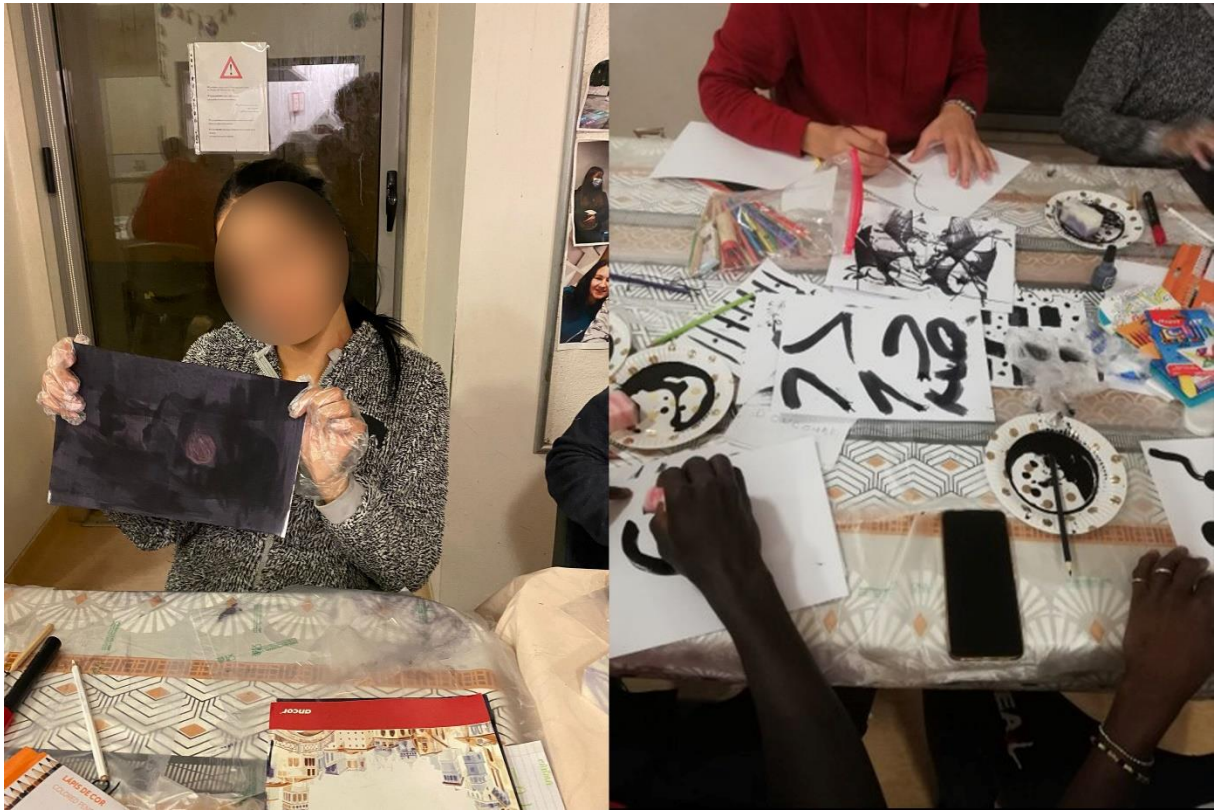

Image 2. Salma and her aforementioned work.

Image 3. The creative process (photos taken by Olga Krysanova, 2023).

It was the end of the session that really threw me off-balance. I knew that the stopping point was approaching, and we tried to guide the session to a close in order to be on time, but it still became somewhat more chaotic as the kitchen noise arose and the youths became obviously distracted by the prospect of the upcoming dinner. When we did announce the end, what many if not all of them did was either immediately turn their drawings over for garbage, or fold them in half to keep them. I felt a keen sense of loss: to me, many of the drawings were frankly beautiful and well worth keeping, and it felt jarring to realise how differently we saw them. In later sessions, they would tell me that they 'don't have space' in their rooms to keep them; as mentioned I didn't get the opportunity to see their rooms so I cannot reflect on that statement, but still it shows that their creations weren't deemed valuable enough to be worth making the space for. I would like to reflect that while I personally would certainly like that people in general appreciated the part of themselves that can partake in the act of creating something out of nothing, I acknowledge that certain conditions must be met for a person to have the resource to dedicate to caring about something they consider superfluous.

If I were to analyse this session – and the ones that came after – I would have to say that I don't think I selected the right approach with these youths. The concept of playing around with the material without a clear goal in mind or strict rules in place was how I was taught in my own educational life, and after a little bit of initial confusion and tension my fellow students and I would generally dive into it and come out with pleasing results. And it was the same way I engaged with the children when I worked as a therapist – the process of engaging with their creative sides and learning the relevant skills and interacting with other people was the goal in and of itself, with the result, at that age, being largely inconsequential. While it being the most natural and obvious method to me according to my experiences, I don't think it was fitting for the refugee youths. An educator's approach matters greatly when it comes to keeping the students motivated and engaged, and ideally the educator needs to be aware enough to recognise the needs of their students and flexible enough to respond to those needs by adjusting the approach. Where some might thrive in an environment where they are encouraged to make their own decisions and take the lead in learning, others might become shy and too unsure to venture out. Much of this response depends on the self-confidence and other internal resources of the person, and as unaccompanied refugee youths, living in a shelter in a foreign country in a seemingly perpetual state of uncertainty as they wait for the decision on their legal status, it is not unlikely that they were low on self-confidence and understandably wary to engage in an activity suggested by someone they didn't know with no clear goals outlined.

Another component making up their hesitation could also be that many of them had never engaged in drawing (or any kind of recreational arts and crafts) prior to our sessions, and so what, to me, was an invitation to play, to them could come off as a leap into the unknown. A student-first approach can still work and still yield good results with the caveat that the educator provides enough support and encouragement, but as I reflect back on this experience I'm afraid that I wasn't flexible enough to cover this need to the degree that was required. Especially in that first session, I do remember quite desperately wanting to provide, to help create that atmosphere of trust and safety that I always knew to be so crucial for engaging with creative tasks. But I have to admit that I myself felt shy and stressed out by this new situation (whether it was picked up on by the youths and to what degree I don't know, but I know it impacted my ability to be flexible and quick-thinking), and the extremely robust language barrier certainly impacted my ability to interact to the degree I would like to in order to transmit my encouragement.

Regardless, I continued giving these sessions on a semi-regular basis, at first together with Prof. Santinho, but soon enough on my own. Our agreed upon time was Wednesday evenings, before dinner, and later we switched to Thursdays. My idea was to offer a variety of materials and themes to work with, which led to workshops that covered different techniques (like collage, decoupage, sculpture) and topics like holiday celebrations or dream houses. I was interested in bringing up topics

that could invite them for introspection and sharing, and while I never asked them directly as it was difficult to predict what could be a potentially upsetting topic, I always did my best to signal that I was open to listen by asking follow-up questions and not talking over them, giving them the space to come forward if they wanted to. As a result, we ended up discussing, one on one or in small groups, the life stories of a few youths, their current situations with documents, their everyday life in Portugal, and their hopes and dreams for the future. For example, in a session that happened on April 11th, 2024, right after Christian Easter and the end of Ramadan, I brought various magazines for the purpose of making collages, and the topic that naturally emerged from our circumstances (both the date and the contents of the magazines, many of which were home- and food-oriented) was holiday celebrations and feasts. While some of the youths chose to go with the flow and not stick to a specific topic (which I also supported and gave them space to present and discuss if they wanted to), Christiane chose to create a collage about Easter celebrations back home in Congo; while the images from Portuguese recipes didn't necessarily relate to the foods she was used to, she took the time to describe them to me instead with a soft smile on her face.

Another time, when I brought clay for us to play around with, Nyang spent the session meticulously creating a boat. When I asked him about it, he spoke at length about wanting to go back home to Gambia and have a big boat like this and work as a fisherman. After some time and more silent work, he grew more solemn and shared with me the story of his flight to Europe. He spoke in a measured, even way that almost felt rehearsed as he told me about the troubles he had with his father, looking at me now and again as if to make sure I was listening; then, about his flight from Gambia to Senegal, then to Morocco, Algeria, and finally Libya. He stayed in Libya for eight months to save up for a passage on a boat to Europe, earning money by feeding farm animals. He came there with a few of the people he knew, and one of them – his cousin – was abducted during those eight months. Eventually, his friends boarded a boat, but Nyang stayed behind to receive the last of the money he was owed for his labour; soon after, he heard that the boat sank with almost no survivors making it to the shore.

Over time, the youths mostly self-selected not only by wanting to spend their time on an art session, but also on being able to communicate with me, so we were generally able to hold conversations in English or halting Portuguese; when someone would join us with whom I had no overlapping languages, either others helped, or we got by on smiles and nods of appreciation, or by sharing music – many times they were excited to put something on both as an ambient noise to improve the atmosphere or to share with me, the music choices ranging from rap in Arabic to Portuguese pop to Christian soft rock in English, Portuguese, or French. Sometimes, I would bring snacks – especially if someone mentioned that there was a food they hadn't tried yet, like walnuts – and, while my and their experiences as an immigrant and refugees respectively were, of course, different, we still found common points to bond over as we remarked on this or that aspect of

Portuguese living as outsiders looking in, such as the prevalence of fish in cuisine or the habit of many Lisbon citizens of wearing the metro card on a lanyard around their necks.

As I was interested both in more opportunities to spend time with the youths and learn about their lives, and to give back to CPR for allowing me to come to the shelter, I offered my services to the staff, and they suggested that I could teach computer literacy to two of the youths who expressed desire to learn. Anita from Benin quit after two sessions as she communicated primarily in French and I do not speak the language, so the sessions turned into one-on-one lessons with Bakary, a boy from Gambia.

My idea was to give him a rounded education on computer and Internet literacy, but it quickly turned into balancing his aspirations with what he could feasibly learn in however much time we would have, as Bakary struggled with typing and using the mouse but wished to learn how to do online shopping and how to apply for jobs. I could not help with the former, as the youths at the shelter would get 50 Euros a week for personal expenses on reloadable cards which could not be used online, so instead we took the goal of applying for jobs and worked towards it.

I had a roadmap of how to get there, starting with basics like accessing Bakary's email account and using software for creating various documents, and continuing into writing CVs, cover letters, and actually applying on job sites. The basics included things like double-clicking, resizing windows, inserting images and text fields, while the more advanced tasks also let us talk a bit more about Bakary's life and experiences. It's not a secret to anyone on the Western job market that a lot depends on making a good first impression, and that first impression in turn depends on being able to determine one's experiences and skills that would make them useful for the proposed task and transmitting that impression to the other party. So the first thing we did with Bakary when time came to practice cover letters was to create a 'template' that he could reuse in the future, with blank spaces left for where he would have to fill in information relevant to a specific job application, as not everything would be useful to list in every case.

For example, one of the jobs Bakary wanted to apply for was the position of a gardener, but when it came to relevant skills he wasn't sure what he could do or how best to describe it, so we paused and I chatted with him for a bit about his life. Back in his home village, he used to help his family with farming, and he ended up telling me about different types of soil and the trees that would grow best in that soil to a degree that I couldn't even hope to be knowledgeable in. However, until I pointed it out, he didn't see that experience as something relevant for a profession – it was simply something he did back home.

I felt somewhat ambivalent about the whole process, as it felt unfair to Bakary that he had to start out on his search for a job while knowing so little about the unspoken rules of the game, and showing him how his knowledge could be pigeonholed into a marketable skill felt disingenuous and

disrespectful to the rich scope of his experiences. But his desire was to learn enough to be able to play that game, so I set aside my own evaluations and focused on that.

In December 2023, we invited the youths for an outing at the *Museu do Traje* in Lisbon – two girls, Salma and Christiane, expressed desire to come along as they were interested in fashion. This also gave us the opportunity to spend time with them outside of the setting of the shelter, which we were curious to do in order to get to know them a bit better. I remember it being initially a bit of a tense time, particularly on the car ride to the museum – we didn't know each other well yet, and the girls were a bit on the defensive, replying in short sentences when prompted and staying quiet in the backseat otherwise. I assumed that the atmosphere would ease up once we had a shared activity to focus on, and that assumption proved to be correct – we had a good time looking at and discussing the exhibited costumes, and by the end of the trip Christiane and I were already chatting away about fashion design and her potential career paths.

We had two photography-oriented workshops with an invited professional, whose approach was to expand the youths' understanding on what kind of photography they could do with their phones, how to do basic editing, and how to transmit ideas using the visuals.[8] The first workshop that took place in December 2023 was portrait-oriented; after a brief introduction to how cameras worked and how best to use the angles, the photographer invited the youths to take pictures of each other using both their phones and the cameras he brought. They took time trying out different angles, discussing why some would work and others wouldn't (for example, getting the camera on eye level with what they wanted to be the focus of the photo, which could include climbing onto a chair or lying flat on the floor), and trying to take spontaneous pictures of moving people which encouraged the youths to be quick in applying what they learned about basic composition.

Importantly, this was also the workshop where the photographer proposed in advance that someone could be a model, which would serve the dual purpose of giving everyone one target to hone their skills on, and leaving the model with a number of beautifully shot pictures. Salma accepted the invitation to model. She ended up being late to the session itself, as it was a Friday afternoon and she was coming back from the mosque – wearing her hijab, she poked her head in the dining room, where we were set up as always, and promised to be there soon. She arrived a significant amount of time later, having obviously taken it to prepare herself, with her hair down and makeup meticulously done, wearing a white blouse and a short black skirt.

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[8] An important part of his background was his extensive work with young immigrants and prior work with Prof. Santinho; together, they have created a documentary as part of a project on cinema and refugees, 'European Project RefugeesIN – Cinema for the Social Inclusion of Refugees'. As such, he was knowledgeable about both the intricacies of work with refugees and cognisant of the ethical aspects of the interactions.

Salma didn't only want to have beautiful pictures for the sake of it – her idea was to apply to modelling agencies, and she hoped to bolster her portfolio. Later, when the pictures were delivered to her, we brought this up with the staff and they told us that, unfortunately, while the agencies would potentially be interested in Salma, their goal would be to lean into the 'exoticism' of a Muslim model. This went against Salma's wishes, as her hijab was an important cultural and religious aspect to her that she did not want to be commodified for the Western gaze and would rather wear Western clothes when modelling.

In February 2024, we had the second photography workshop. This time, the photographer brought an assortment of books and invited the youths to look through them and reflect on what they liked about certain pictures and why. He was always ready to provide context to specific images, showing how much there is to a photo beyond just the photo itself, such as the intention of the photographer, what surrounds the picture and what is left out of it, what can be done to invoke a stronger reaction in the viewer. After this theoretical introduction, the youths were given twenty minutes to disperse around the building and come back with three pictures each: one of something they liked, one of something they didn't like, and one of what made them happy. The youths left readily but returned much more reluctantly, though eventually we managed to all get back together in the dining room. A few of them have sent the pictures they took in our shared group chat, the images ranging from the Bible to the garbage bin in the dining room to the beautiful clouds over Bela Vista. After everyone settled in, the photographer showed the pictures to everyone from his laptop for a brief discussion of what they were meant to convey and how the message could be strengthened. For example, a comment was made how for the 'makes me happy' category, a picture crumpled five Euro bill did not necessarily convey the author's message of loving money and wanting to have more of it – while it wasn't readily feasible for a refugee minor to showcase a pile of cash that would be congruent with his wish to have a lot of money, according to the photographer's point of view what he could have done to enhance the message would be to smooth it out to show the care he had for it.

Notably, this was where Christiane expressed her disdain with the dining room we were spending our workshops in, putting it in her 'don't like' category and describing how much she wasn't enjoying the dreary interior and the empty walls. When I asked what she could imagine that would improve the room, Christiane said that having something painted on the walls could definitely help. This piqued my interest, as I perceived it as Christiane's desire to put her time and energy into improving the space, into making something lasting, maybe making the atmosphere of the place she lived at more welcoming and nicer to inhabit. I wanted to encourage that together with her creativity, so we got to discussing what could be done with the staff. Initially, Christiane wanted to paint anime characters from a show she liked, but as the dining room was a common area I suggested that it would be better to do something more people could relate to. Together with Christiane, we landed on the

idea of painting silhouettes of people filled with African flags. I prepared the images and agreed with the staff on the day when I would come to do the preliminary work – by then, it was already summer – so that later Christiane and I could focus on the more enjoyable parts of the process, but on the day I arrived I was told that the room was soon to be renovated entirely, so it made no sense to paint on the walls if they were to be repainted anyway.

Christiane and I switched gears and turned our attention to the outside wall next to the building. If we painted something on it, it would be clearly visible from the pergola area, and after some discussion we agreed on the map of the world, where we would then fill in the countries from which the youths in CPR came to Portugal, with the idea that later, when someone came from a new country, they could fill it in on the map.

We spend a few weeks working on that project, meeting up every week and working for an hour or two before the summer sun would reach us and make it too hot to continue. Christiane was often busy and would sometimes skip the session or oversleep and come in late, though in the first case she would usually text me in advance.

Overall, I would describe our sessions as peaceful. Christiane was diligent in her work and had a good eye for proportions and details, as well as a quiet, dry sense of humour. We spent time together amicably, though it was often hard for me to hear what she was saying as she made her comments in a soft, contemplative voice. We talked a lot about life in Europe, about the USA – the presidential elections race was in full swing, and Christiane was amused by a certain candidate – and she would tell me about her plans for the future. To her, an ideal situation would be to get education and become a wife and care for her home. She couldn't decide between nursing and dress making, but her focus, according to her, would lie primarily in being a good wife.

We got as far as filling in the oceans and the continents – with the work being 4 metres long and positioned over a steep ramp, this wasn't an easy task – before I had to go away for a month at the end of August. Christiane and I agreed that I would contact her when I returned, as I still intended to continue the mural work with her and the computer classes with Bakary. After I came back and texted both of them, I received no response. When I emailed the staff, they soon responded to me that Christiane had run away from the shelter and her whereabouts were unknown. I have texted her a few times since then, making sure to stress that I was not affiliated with CPR or anyone else who might be looking for her and only wished to know if she was alright or needed any help, but received no reply.

Image 4. The farthest we got with our project before Christiane left (photo taken by Olga Krysanova, 2024).

The staff also informed me that Bakary would like to discontinue our lessons. In autumn, when he agreed to have an interview with me to supplement the conversations we'd had over the year, he was repeatedly apologetic for stopping the lessons, explaining that he had to focus on school again and didn't have the time. He also repeatedly stated how helpful it had been for him, making sure to express his gratitude to me – he has said many times before, and during our interview as well, that he found respect to be one of the most important qualities a person could have.

One issue I have definitely run into on my end is the uncertain nature of our sessions, especially art sessions, taking place. Early on we established a group chat to hopefully streamline organisational aspects, and every week when I was coming I made sure to send reminders in advance – texting the chat a day before, an hour before, and upon arrival. Nevertheless, it didn't seem to have any reliable bearing on turnout – there were times when I would arrive to an empty room and sit there for an hour before leaving; sometimes someone would come by and tell me that everyone was away or busy, other times I would manage to run into the staff and they would apologise and tell me the same thing. For our individual sessions, Bakary and Christiane would often oversleep and arrive when half the time we had for the session would have already passed.

On a personal level, this felt uncomfortable. I would spend time, effort, and my own money to prepare the sessions and acquire the materials with the idea of providing a hopefully interesting and enriching experience, and it felt upsetting to see it disappear into the void. I spent a lot of time contemplating if what I had to offer was simply low on the list of priorities and easy to slip someone's mind – which I would understand the reasoning behind, but while at first it could seem like the youths were strongly encouraged by the staff to attend these sessions, as time went by an everyone got used to each other it felt as if the pressure had eased up, which could mean that the people who did come to the sessions did so of their own volition. This left me with conflicting evidence on which to base my conclusions about whether my presence was beneficial. When Bakary was late for computer class he would often explain it as 'not being woken up in time' by the staff, but why he didn't seem to be able to take the initiative and set an alarm was beyond my understanding. From my personal point of view of a Westerner, it was difficult to read these kinds of signals as anything other than disinterest or disrespect, as I have lived and worked in countries where punctuality and clear communication signify respecting the other person's time and investment into a common cause, so coming from that framework, together with the rest of conflicting signals, left me confused and upset, though I always took care not to show my frustration. On the other hand, I remembered that the concept of time and punctuality varies greatly across cultures, and being more flexible in one's understanding of time might not necessarily reflect disrespect of others.

It is well worth pointing out that these youths may strongly feel the lack of agency in their lives. As the locus of control exists well outside them in many areas of their lives, perhaps the silent protest of our sessions, the ability to say 'no' even just through their (in)actions, was one of the few ways they could exert control over their lives and establish boundaries, much like it was within their power to choose how much of their personal stories they wanted to share with me. To call back to James Scott (1985), this, too, could be an 'everyday form of resistance' – the power to refuse giving their time and effort to something externally imposed. This, too, made up important ethnographic data – information on what they chose not to engage with proving to be as valuable as the rest. After reflecting on this idea, I felt much more understanding towards their possible decision making and much more aware of the disparity of our positions in these relationships, but I think it is worth pointing out that if it wasn't immediately obvious to me, someone who engaged with them from a perspective of goodwill and good faith, then it is perhaps even less obvious to the general public interacting with refugees.

Another of the more prominent figures I interacted with is Abed. He took a harrowing two-year-journey by foot from Afghanistan to come to Europe through Greece, across sixteen countries by his account, eventually reaching Portugal by the age of sixteen. He was one of the youths I met at CPR, and although he soon moved out to live in a shared apartment, for a long time he remained one of the youths participating most consistently in the workshops even if it meant travelling to the shelter. When

I asked him about it, he said it was nice to make something in a space where he wouldn't be judged. Considering how busy his schedule was – studying, working, attending many events and participating in many activities – perhaps a slower, low stakes outlet like this was useful to him indeed.

When I got the chance to interview two members of the CPR staff of the shelter and the topic of Abed came up, I reflected on how busy he always seemed to be, how active, especially compared to how some of the other youths were – withdrawn and quiet, locked in survival mode. The staff exchanged glances and told me that to them it seemed to be more of a matter of filling one's time with activity as a way to 'cope', that Abed filled his days to the brim with things to do to avoid feeling helpless. The idea of describing Abed as helpless – who was always straight-backed and well-dressed, with groomed hair and an attentive, inquisitive spark in his eye, thoughtful and confident despite his young age of nineteen – felt deeply incongruent to me. So when I had to clarify if Abed was like this – the way I came to know him – the entire three years that he'd had spent in Portugal by then, the workers laughed uneasily. 'No, he was completely different when he arrived,' one of them said, miming someone with hunched shoulders and a lowered head. 'But he took advantage of the psychological help we offered, and came to us asking for things to do, and he got better.'

I got to have a few one-on-one meetings with Abed in autumn 2024-winter 2025. Every time I invited him to meet up he was very enthusiastic and welcoming. We would meet in the area where he lived, as I knew he was busy and didn't want to cut into his time by making him travel. Abed would always arrive to our meetings in an inexpensive but well-kept suit, clean-shaven and with combed hair, and acted very gallantly both in terms of adhering to Western etiquette rules and just generally often checking in to make sure I was having a good time and didn't need anything despite my repeated assurances that everything was perfectly fine. At first our meetings were in Belem, where he was sharing an apartment near the monastery, and later near Alto dos Moinhos. Both times Abed invited me to have a look at his living space, which always struck me as almost Spartan in its strictness – bare walls, cleared surfaces, only a few personal items – and all strictly utilitarian, like a bottle of perfume. The rest of the time, we chatted as we walked around, sat in cafes, or on one occasion hid from the pouring rain at a gas station. It was always easy to talk with Abed – he readily engaged with the topics I proposed and just as readily offered his own, laughed easily and didn't let pauses in conversation become awkward. He told me a lot about his schedule – starting with getting up at five in the morning and going to bed late at night because he needed the rest of the time for his various activities – and, among his job responsibilities, described the social side of his life too, which included playing football in Casa Pia's club as well as providing support to refugees younger than him living in the area. On one occasion we passed a group of boys and one of them ran up to Abed for a quick chat – after they left again, Abed remarked to me how important he finds it for kids to have a support network like this, and that it feels right to him to be part of it.

As for his future, at the time of our meetings Abed was finishing school and preparing to enter university to study political science – he likes talking to people and telling them about his life story, and it feels natural to him to advocate for marginalised communities, like when he travelled to France and Hungary and Romania as a participant of an 'Every Story (Teller) Matters' program earlier that year. He wanted to be a politician and have a direct influence on things that matter to him. He also wanted to start a car dealership for a straightforward way to have financial security. 'Where do you find the energy for all of this?' I asked, incredulous, and Abed laughed, 'When you try to have a good life, you get the energy.'

By all accounts, Abed is the definition of a success story, an almost archetypal example of a model refugee: someone who survived such hardship to make something of himself in the new country, seemingly flawlessly integrated and confident in his prospects for the future. It is certainly admirable and his successes are well worth celebrating, but it did – and still does — make me wonder what factors, both internal and external, as well as their interaction – fed into helping Abed succeed compared to his peers who remain farther from their desired outcomes.

In October 2024, I attended an online network event hosted by REFUGIN, which was a short session where practitioners shared their insights on working with youths in refugee-like situations. One of the people presenting was Catarina[9], a member of the project InPulsar in Leiria, which is a project occupying a niche similar to CPR. Her presentation featured quite prominently the troubles that social workers deal with in their daily working life, especially highlighting the prominence of stress linked with the rigidity and slowness of the legal system and its bureaucracy. Understandably, this led to a lot of stress and frustration from the staff. People who end up working with refugees tend to be driven to help for reasons other than monetary, but even so the enthusiasm is a fragile thing that has many factors working against it. They are often understaffed and underpaid, placed in the position between what felt like swimming against the current in navigating the system on the one side, and having to try and keep up the morale of the youths looking to them for help and support on the other. Catarina spoke about burnout as a consistently present threat and the methods they used at InPulsar to mitigate it, like setting clear boundaries about availability outside of working hours or having regular group check-ins to support each other in difficulties and share in the successes.

I was interested in hearing more of this perspective, so I emailed Catarina some time after this online event, asking for an interview. She offered to meet at Lisbon's oceanarium as she was taking her charges there that week, and so in December I got to spend a few hours with her group. As far as interviews go, the setup perhaps wasn't the most optimal as we were frequently interrupted, but on the other hand it gave me the chance to observe the group in a dynamic setting, and despite the

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[9] A pseudonym

attention she paid me and the thoughtfulness with which she answered my questions it was obvious that she remained focused on her charges as well, often making comments to them about something we were looking at or addressing their concerns.

The project in Leiria is very different from CPR, in that the youths live in what is called 'supervised autonomy' rather than a dorm-style shelter. InPulsar rents apartments for them, helping them integrate as they share the buildings with local people. Catarina's opinion was that the family court, when making a decision which organisation to assign a minor to, does so based on the qualities of the minor vs the setup and the services the organisation can offer, like degree of independence or language proficiency, to ensure the most efficient use of available resources.

Of course, I couldn't help comparing the group I was observing from InPulsar to the youths I came to know during my time in CPR. In that, the former appeared to me as more involved and excitable, more readily socialising with each other and addressing the members of the staff who were there with them. I made small talk with some of them and they appeared confident and happy to chat. One of them, a shyer artistic boy, after a word of encouragement from the staff, even took my tablet – I brought it with me to take notes and make sketches – and drew a quite detailed fish despite it being his first time working on a tablet. Considering what I was told about the living setup and the sorting of the youths with the purpose of making the best match between a minor and an organisation, it made sense to me that these would be the youths who could take the most from a project geared towards more independent people.

On the other hand, this comparison would be anything but fair. I met the InPulsar youths once and only for a couple of hours, in an exciting place that was out of the ordinary for them, and when they heard the staff talk positively to me about them, they could possibly be encouraged to behave even better in front of a new person. The CPR youths, on the contrary, I'd met in their familiar setting, multiple times over the course of a school year, observing them in their routine, tired from school or work. So while the impulse to compare the youths looked after by two different organisations was a natural one, I don't think I had nearly enough data to come to any sort of meaningful conclusions or to make any generalisations – which I would like to avoid as much as possible anyway – that wouldn't be uselessly reductive.

In February 2025, I got the chance to receive some very valuable insight from Helena[10], a researcher and practicing lawyer in the field of immigration and asylum. As well as helping with providing the Country of Origin information for the refugee status determination process for AIMA, she donates her hours – in addition to the hours she works at the firm – for asylum cases.

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[10] A pseudonym

Due to its location, Portugal doesn't really receive refugees by boat, so Helena described to me the general process of how it goes when they arrive by plane. When the refugee minors are recognised as someone without adults responsible for them, they are held at the airport for forty-eight hours, sometimes longer. This is the time when the proceedings with the family court begin, where the judge will nominate a certified institution from the list to take responsibility for the minor, with their presidents acting as their official representatives. This also means they often don't get the opportunity to get to know the minors under their care as they are busy with the administrative tasks, leaving the actual care to shelter staff, psychologists etc. After this responsibility is assigned, the case can proceed with age verification, for example, as well as placing the minor in school and determining which class would be appropriate for them. If the minor doesn't speak a European language, it is necessary to identify the languages they do understand and provide a way to communicate across the language barrier. And, of course, the medical exams include analysing teeth and measuring the length of the femoral bones, although in the last three years, according to Helena, there has been a return to gynecological examinations as well, although generally these exams are not favoured by lawyers because of their invasive nature, especially in the context of the minors' young age and potential history of sex-related abuse and trauma. Moreover, sex development can be greatly impacted by external conditions – factors like malnutrition or stress can alter the timeline and make the results of the examination, already not 100% reliable and only able to provide an age range, even more vague. There is an assumption that 'of course' everyone knows their age, and so a refugee should as well, so if they say they don't or can't provide a precise answer they must be lying. But there can easily be situations where the person, especially a younger one, doesn't know their exact age, having no documents but only vague ideas of what a family member had told them in the past. But also it is important to remember how stressful arriving in Portugal and handing oneself over to the authorities can be. Since 2023, the institution responsible for border control is PSP, the public police. So when they arrive and are received by police they may naturally be afraid of providing any kind of information that might complicate their journey going forward – or worse, have them turned away entirely.

As the medical examinations can only provide an age range and it falls across the age of majority, in general the law directs to consider the person a minor. However, Helena remarked that she's been seeing AIMA try to change it to be the other way around due to the reduction of available places and resources (due to, in turn, less money placed in the Migration and Integration Fund since the end of 2024) – to make the presumption, in unclear cases, that the refugee is an adult, as legally recognised minors have a right to much more assistance than just having a place to stay. And this is often where the institutions ask lawyers for help in challenging these decisions. *Actually it's just bureaucracy,'* Helena shook her head. *'They don't have anything against them, against that person, but they just have no more places to attribute to this child or adult, and they just want to push the*

process.' But as the result of that bureaucracy, a minor can erroneously be determined to be an adult and placed in a shelter with other adults – and as it takes time to challenge these rulings, they can be left in these conditions for a month, which can pose its own dangers as well.

When I asked Helena about the determination process of which organisation is assigned responsibility for a child, thinking about the conversation I had with Catarina, Helena called it random, that the court has a list of available organisations and simply uses that list. According to her, these decisions are made independently of the minor's qualities; sometimes it is taken into account if they have any connections in the area of one or the other organisation, for example someone who isn't family but shared part of the journey to Portugal with them. In this context, according to Helena's words, the determination between, for example, the dorm-like situation of CPR and the supervised autonomy of InPulsar rested on the age of the youth: until fourteen years old, the minors have to be under direct supervision of the institution, in the ages between fourteen and sixteen they can transition from the institution to an apartment, and when they are sixteen or above they might be able to live with supervised autonomy. But at the end of the day, Portugal is a small country, and there aren't many organisations providing refuge and asylum help – fewer now too, with reduced funding, so while effort is made to make the best matches between the minors and the organisations, there aren't always perfect solutions.

'In asylum, you can't follow money,' said Helena as an aside to this situation, which prompted me to ask what made her go into this section of law and not any other. To her, it was a matter greatly influenced by her childhood and early adulthood experiences in French Guiana and Brazil. Volunteering with refugees turned into going to law school and becoming a lawyer in the section of immigration, to hopefully provide a tangible way to help. *'Sometimes I don't feel like I do as much as I would like to,'* Helena confessed. When I invited her to elaborate, she said the following:

> *'Sometimes it's hard working with the system and within the system to try and help people. For example, I did law school, I'm a lawyer. I don't want to work with this system, I want to work with the law. Sometimes it's much more political than using the law itself can be. And sometimes it can be hard. I'm a lawyer, but I work with psychologists, with [the] social system, and I can see this kind of, "What's happening? Come on!"'*

This was her reflection on the 2023 transition from SEF to AIMA and how things are still not working properly, so the work against the bureaucracy becomes particularly difficult with the added complications of disorganisation. Sometimes she speaks to different people and they have no idea about the matter of discussion, yet they are the ones with the power to decide whether a person should get international protection. Obviously, dealing with this adds an unnecessary layer of fighting the building frustration at the constant obstacles that shouldn't be there to begin with.

This feeling of swimming against the current is a sentiment I've heard echoed across the board, from the shelter staff to people presenting at refugee-related conferences, so it's safe to say that this is a widespread issue and both a source of great frustration for the workers and an energy sink, made worse now with the current political right-wing lean and the rising conservative and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Another thing Helena does is provide training for the police who are working at the airports, as they don't seem to be well prepared to be thrown into this line of work and can feel abandoned and unsupported by the system:

> *'For them it's also hard. Because when they start the career, they start as police in the streets, and now they are in the borders, and they can't see sometimes how a human being can be mean. Like a child who has been transported in bags, all this stuff, human trafficking, and it's not easy. You have to also try to work with your own prejudice in that, because when you see many bad cases from one country, it's hard not to start having prejudice against people coming from that country. So it's a complex work.'*
>
> 'What kind of training do you do for the police?'
>
> *'Immigration and asylum law. So I just go there and try to put something in their heads.'*

Although it was phrased in a joking manner, Helena reflected that the PSP are trying to help. They may be unprepared and floundering and have to request a lot of help from experts like her, but they have to work as well and pick up the pieces left behind by SEF. In comparison with SEF, who Helena felt acted 'like they know everything', PSP are humble enough to admit that they are only just starting out and need all the help they can get, which led to a pleasant surprise for Helena when she started to receive invitations to conduct these trainings.

Another aspect I was curious to focus on in our interview was the topic of personal contact with the minors Helena worked with. She revealed to me that the current system is designed in a way that when a lawyer registers to donate some of their time, they can only pick general sections of the law they work within, with Immigration and Asylum falling within administrative law – law that also includes, for example, environmental and housing law. From that pool of lawyers, a person is assigned to a case, which means that a tax lawyer can be randomly nominated to solve cases of international protection. As it falls well outside their area of expertise, this can lead to unnecessary complications (such as simply missing an important deadline, as was the case described in *'Coming of Age While Challenging Borders; Networks of Solidarity and Resistance of Swedish-Afghan Youths on the Move in Europe'* (Rebelo 2024)). Moreover, if a lawyer is used to working with papers, they would be uncomfortable and disinclined to talk to the person they are supposed to represent.

'But if you don't talk to the person, how can you really understand the situation?' said Helena to this. She doesn't always get the opportunity to have personal contact with the minors – when the state asks for her help, there is little wiggle room, but in *pro bono* cases she can ask to speak with the minor first. She said she preferred to take this opportunity when possible – *'Because it helps a lot. You can do your own research, but it will never be like the person.'* Even if the minor is as young as eight or nine years old, Helena considered that they would always be the best source, even if it's not generally seen like that. However, for aforementioned reasons, Helena evaluated herself to be more of an exception to the rule in her desire for personal contact and client-oriented approach, and her main source of frustration seemed to be with the system.

Aside from my interviews, I also got some impressions about the field while attending conferences, like the aforementioned online meeting of REFUGIN, but also the *'50 anos de abril, 5 anos do Fórum Refugio: Novas Realidades de Asilo e Imigração'* in June 2024, the IMISCOE conference in July 2024, and REFUGIN's final conference in May 2025. As these events were largely about professionals reflecting on their respective fields and placing these reflections in the context of the bigger picture, this provided interesting insights into the interconnectedness of different puzzle pieces like asylum law, refugee integration, culture, and mental health. A representative of Fundação Focus, for example, spoke about organising language courses geared especially towards faster employment and holding thematic workshop sessions, whereas a member of CPR spoke about trying to focus on all dimensions, starting with safe accommodations and immediate integration in school, stressing the importance of integrating a young refugee first and finding employment second.

As for challenges, bureaucracy was once again mentioned as a large obstacle in facilitating the workflow, with paperwork-related delays paralysing the process of accessing the necessary resources, unreliability of funding, staff turnover. A disconnect between the funding and the field was prominently felt too, with speakers under the impression that those responsible for disseminating the funds are unaware of the state of events at ground level and are difficult to get a hold of and explain the reality.

School, in particular, was mentioned as a point of contention: it was pointed out how the refugee minors often bring experience from their past which is difficult to recognise and qualify within the existing Western school system, wondering if the school curriculum should be re-examined and made more inclusive (the contemporary Western school system already receives a lot of criticism for its shortcomings in the Western society too, so perhaps re-examining it could benefit everyone and not only refugee minors). Success stories, on the other hand, seemed to include scenarios where cultural mediators could be involved (often ex-refugees themselves as people with lived experiences of the process), and where the refugee youths were able to meaningfully interact with the host community while retaining and celebrating a connection to their own cultures – acting as evidential

confirmation of the idea that integration seems to facilitate the best results compared to other acculturation strategies. A balance found between guiding a refugee minor within a system that is foreign to them and taking their wants into consideration was also pointed out as an ideal to strive for, although it ties very strongly into the lived experiences at shelters – if a shelter is understaffed and the workers overworked, there is an unequivocal limit to how much control they can exercise over the lives of their charges – meaning that if a minor elects to skip school and prioritise working during those hours, they might not be privy to this information as quickly as they would prefer. Of course, having rigid control over someone impacts the mutual trust and respect which are crucial for a young person's confidence, self-esteem, and ability to rely on the community, in which context the concept of the dignity of risk arises – how much control over their choices should a they have, and how to determine it within the points of view of cultures, child development, and inclusion strategies?

2.4.   Reflections and the Emergent Research Question

As part of our own input, in 2024 Cristina Santinho and I published an article titled *'Conducting Research with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors within an Institutional Context: Challenges and Insights'* (Santinho, Krysanova 2024) as a way to reflect on the fieldwork we'd conducted at CPR and offer a meta-analysis which could perhaps be extrapolated on future research done on refugee minors and the factors impacting it. There is a lack of information regarding the difficulties that the researchers and the unaccompanied refugee minors have in relating to each other in a confined context of an institution, factors ranging from power dynamics to suboptimal space conditions to the necessary heterogeneity of their groups which is starkly different from organically formed cultural communities, to the potential influence of observers (both researchers and the staff) on the observed (the minors). As the result the research obtained becomes influenced by these constraints that prevent organic relationships from forming. We advocate for expanding the research, when possible, beyond the scope of the living areas of the minors and both accompanying and inviting them to various activities to facilitate organic relationship formation, as well as getting to observe and interact with them in varying environments to obtain more well-rounded impressions of their characters.

Overall, although my fieldwork didn't span a very long time, it was quite intensive and encouraged, through time spent together and activities shared, a deep emotional connection with some of the youths, especially after I started coming to CPR on my own. As I come from a specific background that includes art, art therapy, and education, and spent many years in solo immigration, I believe that it framed my perception and informed my actions, resulting in the kind of ethnographic research that would virtually be unattainable by anyone else, just as someone else's research would be unattainable by me. I believe that in this lies the power of anthropology — in the unique

perspectives not only of our interlocutors, but of our own selves, and our individual positionalities and their interactions prove to be a formidable tool in conducting research. This personal, situated way of doing anthropology may be subjective, but I possess the tools and the capacity to be aware of and conscious of that subjectivity and take it into consideration when describing my experiences and findings in the field.

Summarily, working with these youths and listening to them, as well as talking with the staff, and considering my own experiences as a person from outside coming in regularly to offer a service, led me to contemplating the matter of motivation. What motivates refugee youths to dedicate their time to this or that activity? What do they find value in, and why? What factors impact it depending on their cultural background and current context? How can someone else help with shaping and directing that motivation to achieve results that would be deemed most beneficial for the youths (and who would be qualified to make that evaluation)? And not only that, but how does it work on the receiving end? How do members of the host community working with refugee minors decide what to offer them to facilitate their integration and inclusion, and how do they not lose motivation to keep trying when their efforts and their best intentions don't necessarily lead to desired outcomes? Where does this disconnect come from? What motivates a person to put their energy into a particular occupation or action, what motivates a young refugee to go to school or attend workshops or go on excursions – and what, in turn, motivates them to do the opposite?

The questions are numerous, and while some of them find their answers here, answering them all to the degree they deserve falls beyond the scope of this thesis. And so, to repeat my question: **What factors impact motivation on unaccompanied refugee youths' path to inclusion in Portugal, and what can influence these factors?**

CHAPTER 3

The Cultural Dissonance of 'Childhood'

If I succeed in my application, I assure you that I will perform all my duties to an exemplary standard to quickly become a team member who contributes positively to the organisation's objectives.

(Excerpt from Bakary's cover letter)

As I have mentioned before, one of my most prominent occupations during my time in CPR was the computer literacy class I offered to Bakary, one of the youths living at the shelter, who at the start of our work together was seventeen years old. He requested my help in compiling a CV and applying for various jobs in Lisbon. Together, we created a basic CV and a cover letter with spaces reserved for tailoring both to specific applications. When he expressed the wish to apply for a position as a gardener, I talked with him to gauge what relevant skills he had by which the employer could judge if he would be a good fit. Initially, Bakary was certain that he had no relevant skills, but after talking with him I learned that back home he helped his family with sowing and gardening, confidently knew the difference of types of soil and its importance for crops and fruit trees, and easily handled large sacks of soil. He definitely knew more and was more proficient in gardening than I, and learned what he knew by working alongside his family members. But to him, it didn't appear to be a 'marketable skill' until I pointed it out to him and put it into such words. To him, it was simply part of growing up.

Over time, we wrote and submitted a few more applications for different jobs, and every time Bakary would initially reject the idea of having specific skills necessary for a position, but then we would find out together that he invariably had something in his arsenal that would set him apart — if not from 'professional' candidates with standardised education on the matter, then still definitely from people with no lived experience like what he had. I think it highlights both the intertwined nature of cultural knowledge and maturation, and the inconvenience of the Western approach. Even myself, who is definitely not a member of the Portuguese society but is still a Westerner, in my attempts to 'translate' Bakary's skills into what I knew his employers would be receptive to, I was faced with the insufficiency of the way by which we quantify and qualify the lived experience, and the disappointing knowledge that Bakary's would still undoubtedly not be deemed enough: even though he was evidently 'good enough' to be an effective worker on his family farm, the markers of a suitable worker (which could also be seen as markers of maturation) on the CV — someone with 'professional experience' of several years, a licensed education in a relevant field, and a driver's license — were not met.

Dear sir/Madam

I am applying for the above position with your company as it is a role I can perform exceptionally well to a high standard.

In addition to being a strong communication and team worker, I am the type of person who understands how vital my performance within the role is to the success of your company

If I succeed in my application, I assure you that I will perform all my duties to an exemplary standard to quickly become a team member who contributes positively to the organisation's objectives.

Thank you so much, am person who really   appreciate friendly with people and am kindly, honesty,humble and loyal, respect people and hard work person, I would love to be working to your company.

Your faithful
Insert full Name Here, if you look my application any questions you can send me the feedback and have nice days

Image 5. Bakary's cover letter he wrote as his homework. July 2024.

In other words, Bakary considered himself to be competent and experienced enough to take on the job, but his perception was, by default, a subjective one and informed by his sociocultural context, where a person of his gender, age, and experience was considered a fully-fledged worker, yet in Portugal, he was encouraged to prioritise school, leaving applications for full-time positions as something extracurricular.

The period of childhood and particularly adolescence is a much more social and dynamic construct than it is generally assumed to be[11]. Historically, humanity as a whole has gone through the evolution of treating youngsters as 'miniature adults' to separating adolescence into a stage of development with its own specificities and challenges. A big role in this was played by the industrialisation and urbanisation processes of the 19th century, through a combination of cities becoming notable points of interest because of the expanding industries and the subsequent population flow from the countryside, the need for a relatively educated workforce in order to operate

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[11] As mentioned in the introduction, I use 'youth' as the umbrella term defined by the UN (https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/faq.html) and describing people of 15-24 years of age. For statistical purposes, the UN therefore defines 'children' as people under the age of 14; however, there is the acknowledgement that Article 1 of CRC expands the age range up to 18 (same for 'minors') for the purpose of providing protection and rights to as large an age-group as possible (*ibid.*). UNICEF defines 'adolescents' as people of 10-19 years (https://data.unicef.org/topic/adolescents/overview/). When referencing my theoretical research in this chapter, I tend to employ the terms used by the cited authors; however, this is done with the acknowledgement that, while 'child', 'youth', 'adolescent', and 'minor' are not interchangeable terms, they are all interrelated and inseparable in each individual's life and contribute to the sum of legal circumstances, sociocultural expectations, and lived experiences.

the nascent machinery and the answering expansion of education systems and the introduction of compulsory schooling in most Western countries in the 19th-20th centuries. Industrialisation was what may have kicked off the beginning of the demographic transition, as the slowly increasing role of human capital in production led to increased investment of said capital in children by parents. Although young children still worked in the hazardous industrial conditions much like their countryside peers worked alongside their parents in the fields, overall this marked the beginning of a gradual yet noticeable shift towards viewing children as developing dependents rather than self-sufficient workers of equal status in terms of duties yet inferior status in terms of rights.

As a result, today children – particularly in certain geographic and sociocultural contexts – are largely viewed as sacrosanct. 'Think of the children' is an argument invoked so often in debates on morality and legislation that, to a degree, it has shifted into the realm of irony. In news reports on the numbers of wounded and deceased after a disaster, children are often mentioned separately to highlight the degree of the tragedy. Both parents and the society at large are expected to make children and their well-being a top priority, and the stories of sacrifices that adults have to make for the sake of children are so commonplace they are considered to be self-evident. To sacrifice something for a child is not viewed as an extraordinary act — a virtuous and often an admirable one in its difficulty, but an obvious course of action all the same. Overall, the idea of childhood is treated as something to be treasured and shielded — a child is someone who has yet to learn of the evils and hardships of the world, and them having to learn of those 'too soon' is regarded as unfortunate and even tragic. This is even reflected in the English language — if something is described as 'childlike', it is implied to be anywhere from simple and naive to innocent and fundamentally optimistic and pure.

Of course, this largely pertains to the Western society. Societies that have not yet, for any number of reasons, completed the Second Demographic Transition — or societies for whom it appears to be irrelevant through their structure, like indigenous cultures living at their own individual pace outside of the broader scope — have no reason to adjust their child rearing traditions and worldview either. Societies that live communally and off subsistence farming/hunting/gathering will have a different living system compared to urbanised nuclear families. This already hints at a much wider variety of approaches and conceptualisations of what is to be expected when it comes to children.

The key tasks of adolescence are learning of and preparing for social and occupational roles, as well as developing a stable identity, and this is facilitated through prolonged and complex exposure to culture with the help of family, both of those elements acting in an interlocked system of influence. Family is the vehicle through which cultural values are transmitted to the child, to be later reinforced by other institutions (Pumariega, Joshi 2010). Margaret Mead (1928) spoke of how cultural characteristics are learned in infancy and then developed and reinforced in later stages of growing up. At the same time, cultural lessons serve as a part of learning exposure (Baker 2001), as development

of language and formation of self-awareness and consciousness happen within the context of culture, through the child interacting with adults, peers, and objects. They attempt and complete tasks, use relevant tools and follow examples of others, and none of these components would be presented or available to them — or required, indeed — if not for the cultural context which dictates that a certain task has to be done, and that it has to be done with a specific tool and in a specific way.

Cultural context also shapes and directs the expectations parents have about their children. These span the range of early childhood developmental milestones, from walking and talking to involvement in 'adult' tasks and school performance. Even the expectations regarding familial piety or the 'rebellious teen spirit' can vary culturally, and in the end these expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The actual ages of children reaching the discussed milestones closely reflect the expectations of their mothers across cultures (Pumariega, Joshi 2010), and teenagers, upon whom it has been consistently impressed that they are prone to risk-taking, irresponsible behaviour, and emotional volatility, they become less inclined to try and exert control over their emotions since they are, to a degree, 'expected' to fail in this endeavour (Qu 2023).

In comparison to nuclear family cultures, collectivist culture children tend to have a higher sense of self-efficacy (Bandura 2002), which could be the result of being left 'to their own devices' in cultures where, for example, they are presumed to learn from their peers rather than adults (Lansford, French, Gauvain 2021), or are involved in 'adult' tasks earlier than what Western culture would generally consider appropriate or safe. Overall, it could be argued that the sanctification of childhood and the institutionalised shift in learning has brought the Global West to a setup where a person is deemed largely not self-sufficient and 'ready' for the adult life until the arbitrary moment when the legal system declares them an adult. The education system of kindergarten and school has largely taken over the aforementioned process of learning and preparing for social and occupational roles as parents have to dedicate more of their attention to providing for the family in the late-stage capitalist society, often with little available support from the extended family. This takeover comes with mixed results: nowadays, many report the complete unpreparedness for 'real life' upon completing school. This means that the arbitrary status of being an adult does not necessarily reflect the actual state of being or the person's self-perceived preparedness. Moreover, new responsibilities (both legal and cultural, like the duty to file tax reports or the pressure to move out of the family home) can overwhelm and further undermine the person's self-esteem, putting pressure on their mental health.

Bakary's reflections provide an example of learning not by engaging with the standardised educational system and its textbooks, but by participating in tasks alongside his family members and internalising the knowledge this way. Bloch (1998) speaks about how much of it is fundamentally non-linguistic: in order to explain a task or a process in words to another person, one must verbalise their learned experience, transmit that verbalisation, and then hope that it will be received and interpreted

and internalised in a way that will allow the other person to complete the task correctly. This is the argument for 'learning by watching' as a better method of receiving and processing the information, and 'learning by doing' as a connected and ultimately superior one. Imitation and tentative participation lead to mastery with much more prominent results than simply reading instructions or case studies. What Lave (1988) calls 'apprenticeship learning' is a setup that is mostly unexpected to find in the Western society, save for cases of manual labour or occupations deemed 'archaic'; at the same time, its comparative prominence in other societies, dictated by the largely non-linguistic way of transmitting knowledge, may be explained less by the culture of education and more by the general nature of knowledge that is used to access tasks such as weaving or tailoring. What can be seen here is the interplay of different factors — cultural, societal, and now cognitive too — that steers cultures in different directions of interacting with, transmitting, and applying knowledge.

A tendency seems to emerge: in cultures where children are given responsibilities and involved in the community's life from an early age, their stages of maturation can be marked either by ritualised internal changes (for example, first menstruation) or by actions taken and milestones reached (for example, first kill on the hunt). In the Global West, stages of development are marked by external, superimposed events such as going to kindergarten, graduating school, becoming old enough to apply for a driving or marriage license, reaching the age of majority. They can be subsequently ritualised in their own right, but as they stand, these are markers almost entirely unrelated to a person's actual progress and development. Reaching one's 18th birthday doesn't turn them from a supposedly helpless and clueless child into a completely new person overnight with a new set of priorities, values, and knowledge, even if they do acquire a new set of responsibilities. It seems that it happens the other way around: rather than acquiring a new status based on a change that is brought on either internally or through deliberate action, the person is faced with the fact of their status changing and has to adjust to that change in order to fit into cultural, familial, and own expectations.

Overall, we have progressed to a better understanding of the importance of culture in shaping the patterns of identity formation, which in turn leads to the awareness that the dissonance can have an adverse effect on the person's mental health (Pumariega, Joshi 2010). Being a refugee youth is a state which forces very harshly to reckon with the cultural differences, as well as try to adjust to the changes. By the end of adolescence, a person is required to resolve several aspects to achieve healthy psychosocial development, which include access to material resources to cover basic needs, relationships and related negotiation of said access to resources, balance of sense of responsibility to self and to one's community, power and control, cultural adherence or opposition, and social justice. Which means that, arriving in the host country, refugee youths have to quickly adjust and adapt their own worldview and actions in order to resolve these matters, and the issue of culture comes starkly into focus. Becoming a refugee at a young age is not a common evolution in growth but an additional,

often traumatic experience subjugating the natural progression of maturation in accordance with the conditions it imposes, which only serves to further complicate the already complex process of growing up. It is important to point out the 'cultural shock' that the refugee youths and particularly minors are faced with in the context of what being a minor means in different cultures, what rights and responsibilities it comes with, and how the respective perceptions of a minor impact the way they are treated. In a situation where a language barrier may be present and prominent, and where the legal system is inclined to treat the information the refugee minors divulge to it with suspicion and prejudice, being measured by the Western standards of what a minor is and can do further complicates their opportunity to participate in the host culture, as well as the ability to advocate for themselves.

As Westerners, we see refugee youths and hear their stories and mourn that their childhood was 'taken away from them', but how true is this impression? Of course, being a refugee comes with its own hardships and issues that no child would experience under normal circumstances regardless of their culture and country of origin. But many of these youths have already worked as fully-fledged or fledgling members of their community before becoming refugees, often simply seeing it as something they did rather than categorising it as work, as my experience with Bakary reflects.

Moreover, if we reduce the refugee youths to their stories of trauma and 'lost childhood', we run the risk of constructing an image of them as depoliticised, passive individuals incapable of agency (Chimni 2000), which is a very damaging perspective to have as it impacts the mutual relationship between the youths and the representatives of the host country tasked with 'managing' this part of their journey. Albeit it can be difficult to strike the balance between the right of refugees to participate in determination of their course of life in the new country and the duty of ensuring that their needs are met (Stein 2012), it is nonetheless a balance worth striving towards. Refugee youths deserve to be seen as fully capable of independent decision-making, as it is the only way a collaboration between them and the people caring for them can take place, on grounds of mutual respect and understanding.

Finally, the aforementioned arbitrary nature of the ruling of determining what makes an adult means that, upon reaching the age of majority, the refugees lose the institutional protection and support allotted to minors. They achieve their freedom in terms of being formally recognised as adults — but that recognition comes at a steep price that means a diminished support net as the system no longer shows them the nominal grace that was owed to them when they were still considered children. This, in turn, puts them at a higher risk of social exclusion, which heightens the feeling of insecurity and helplessness (Moleiro, Roberto 2021). Overall, every point raised in this chapter goes to show that the culture-informed dissonance surrounding the notions of childhood, independence, and agency directly complicates the process of refugee integration. As the result of the collision of these differing conceptual frameworks, the common ground between young refugees and the host society is narrowed, creating more opportunities for misunderstanding and mutual disappointment.

CHAPTER 4

Formation of Motivation in the Context of Education

Maybe I'll be a nurse. I would earn a lot of money this way.

– What would you do with it?

Buy stuff for my apartment, have a family. Then I can stop working.

(Conversation with Christiane)

In the previous chapter I reflected on the friction that exists between the self-perception of refugee youths and the perception of the host society. Being forced into a category that doesn't fit well — that of a clueless and helpless child that the Western outlook dictates and that can be radically different from what they were used to back home — is rarely a welcome occurrence. It seems that this incongruence, both in appraising the lived experiences and in the differing cultural ideas of what a minor is, leads to additional issues between refugee minors and the host communities as they go through the conflict of being faced with expectations Imposed by the host society. This can impact their motivation and engagement in schooling, especially for unaccompanied minors, who face heightened vulnerability. For example, one way to gauge where this conflict becomes particularly apparent is school attendance, as the youths, left without constant supervision (both for the reasons of respect and the severe understaffing), would be inclined to skip school and prioritise earning money instead when, to social workers, a much more logical and reasonable strategy would be to get education. And so, having trouble in finding work and/or being directed to dedicate more of their time and energy to school rather than earning their living and sending money back to their families leads to the feeling of an even starker loss of autonomy and ability to support themselves than what they already had happen to them, and undermines their motivation to invest said time and energy into something they consider less important. Additionally, this highlights the need to question Portugal's own education system and its pitfalls, with the refugee youths acting as canaries in the mines as they might be more vulnerable when it comes to the system's deficiencies, bringing a starker contrast to their experiences and making it easier to evaluate.

Education is a crucial aspect of human development in the modern world. In Western countries, it is the primary source of knowledge for the developing mind, as well as a way to learn the strategies and tactics of working with information and transforming it into action. It is important even as a formal qualifier for being a full-fledged member of society: for example, in the job market, it is mandatory to have at least the basic school education to access most jobs, though on average a relevant degree is required too. In this, having a diploma acts as a signifier that the person underwent the mandatory process of learning the standardised information and obtaining the skills for working

with it – a prerequisite of being a productive member of the workforce, although it could be argued that the standardisation of education across the board also yields potential workers who will not 'surprise' the system with out-of-the-box thinking, for better or worse.

But even aside from this default function, education – or, rather, being immersed in its environment – is crucial for social development, an important next step to help the child learn the tenets of being among unrelated peers and not only family. It is viewed as a necessary stage of one's development as it puts the person in a much more expansive social landscape and provides new opportunities to learn and develop feelings of empathy, co-existence, and more complex forms of play.

Overall, because of the young age of the child when they first enter this environment, and because of the comparatively long period that they spend there, school becomes a paramount element of defining the child's lasting relationship with the world, both in terms of how they can (or cannot) work with information and problem-solving, in terms of how they perceive themself and the others (both peers and figures of authority), and what kind of general outlook on their future prospects in life they acquire as a result. For some, the time they spend in the education system is a time of growth, curiosity, and optimism; for others, it is a time of disappointment, struggling, and stress. Many parameters factor into this, starting with the child's sociocultural background, their own physical and mental makeup, the environment created and perpetuated by teachers and peers, and the global politics. For example, a child can come from a working class family of low socioeconomic background or a well-off family of doctors and scientists, which impacts their view on the value in doing well at school; a child can be a boy who enjoys running and jumping, which makes it easier for him to do well in gym classes, or a girl with debilitating menstrual symptoms; a child can have an inspiring teacher and an established friend group or be the victim of peer bullying overseen by apathetic staff; and finally, a child can benefit or lose from legislations targeting vulnerable groups, or state incentives of getting more people in STEM, or cultural and gender stereotypes about particular groups of people being better or worse at certain subjects.

In sum, these factors can often make or break the school experience of a child, letting them fall on a scale anywhere between using the school years as the opportunity to prepare themself for the adult life, or writing them off as a complete loss – or worse, an active detriment to their relationship with education and self-image. In a reciprocal relationship with this, then, is the desire of the child to engage or not engage with school.

All of this means that there is a relationship between a child's experiences in the education system (and all the factors that make up those experiences, as discussed above) and their motivation to engage both with the information and the school environment. And as my thesis focuses on young refugees and school takes up a lot of their time and energy when they come to Portugal and have to deal with a new school environment and education system, to build connections with teachers and

peers and to invest in their nebulous futures, it inevitably becomes a cornerstone of their inclusion in the Portuguese society, which is why I would like to delve deeper in the topic of motivation in the education system.

Motivation can be understood as an internal state of desire to engage in a behaviour oriented towards a goal. That desire is shaped by several components: the value of the goal that the person wants to achieve and the belief in their own ability to achieve that goal. According to Eccles-Parsons (1983), social, personal, and cultural factors such as the cultural background, the past experiences with similar tasks and goals, and the beliefs and perceptions of socialisers influence a person's perceptions of others' and their own expectations of themself, shaping their task-specific beliefs and goals, which in turn impact expectations and values, which finally impacts performance and task choice. In other words, the sum of a person's past experiences, their perception of self, and the awareness of socialisers' beliefs of them eventually impacts the motivation to engage or not engage with a particular task. In this sense, the decision to accept or refuse a task is predetermined by the personal and cultural context where it shapes the person's expectancy of the outcome by shaping their ability belief. Thus, according to the expectancy value theory (Eccles, Wigfield 2002), achievement-related decisions and behaviours of students are most proximally determined by their expectations for success and by the perceived value of the tasks. This is where unaccompanied refugee youths are especially susceptible to the effects of misaligned expectations as they operate within a differing set of social, personal, and cultural factors without the guidance of socialisers of their cultures but, instead, with the resulting beliefs and expectations host society's socialisers have of the refugees and the resulting pressure Thus, their experiences must be understood within this specific context to properly interpret their engagement with education.

There are several components that influence task values. These are: attainment value, intrinsic value, and utility value (Eccles-Parsons 1983). Attainment value refers to how important it is to do well on a task for one's concept of self. In this case, a task is considered important if the individual sees it as central to their identity, or if it allows them to express or confirm particular facets of it. Intrinsic value refers to the enjoyment that an individual gets out of performing the task on its own, i.e. the pleasure they get out of the process itself. Utility value refers to the task's usefulness and how it fits into the individual's future plans, which implies the necessity of being able to conceptualise a future enough to have those plans. At the same time, task value is negatively influenced by cost, i.e. how much time and energy an individual expects to spend on the task. As there is by default a finite amount of time available to complete tasks, it also means that they potentially have to choose between doing this task and doing something else, thus forfeiting the chance to do anything but the task, which also constitutes a component of cost.

Another framework through which the construction of motivation can be viewed is the idea of relevance, which refers to 'an appraised conceptual connection in which an object of inquiry is perceived as having significant bearing upon one or more focal issues' (Albrecht, Karabenick 2019). An individual, performing the relevance appraisal process, examines and evaluates how the conceptual connections of the objects of inquiry relate to the focal issues, and the goal is to identify useful, valuable information. Naturally, this evaluation can only be done on an individual basis and in relation to an individual's priorities and goals. In the context of education and learning, it means that it is important for the students to see the learning activity as worthwhile, something to reap tangible benefits pertaining to their goals and values. In the modern world there is a certain disconnect between the segmented subjects in the Western educational system and the lived experiences, leading to the increased difficulty of finding the connection between the two. This, in turn, can breed insecurity about the future as the result of being unsure that what is learned is relevant to the 'real world'.

It would be prudent to highlight the interconnectedness of the processes of finding relevance and forming ability beliefs with their context. Nothing exists in a vacuum. Despite the historical temptation of perceiving anything from natural laws and production systems to cognitive and emotional processes as something clear-cut and mechanical (going, perhaps, all the way back to Descartes' concept of the world – as soon as humans invent a way of categorising and explaining the world around them, they are prone to applying the same framework to much less obvious processes), Kaplan's (2012) CDS (Complex Dynamic System) approach refers to various phenomena as organism-like systems whose elements are interdependent and constitute more than the sum of their parts. Applied to identity, this approach describes it as the person's emergent comprehensive meaning of [them]self in relation to a particular activity.

Unstable environments can also influence the individual's ability beliefs (Wigfield, Gladstone 2019), making them feel less secure about their chances of successfully completing a task, which in turn in a reciprocal way can make the individual more susceptible to the unstable environments. Together, these two aspects can form a feedback loop which leads to increased uncertainty about the future, and for a displaced person, this can have a drastic impact on their already fragile sense of security.

Research shows that the optimism about one's ability to complete a task starts out relatively high but declines around middle school (Wigfield, Gladstone 2019), but the difference appears to be particularly stark for students from low socioeconomic families or marginalised in some other way. This can be especially true for refugee youths – specifically unaccompanied refugee youths, for the purpose of this thesis. There can be many notable factors contributing to this difference. They have past experiences of stress and trauma as the result of their journeys to the host country, as well as higher levels of current stress linked to the often gruelling process of acclimatisation to the host.

Environmental insecurity – living in an unstable environment, or having recently travelled through it – can outweigh the effects of psychological and other higher needs, making the youths devote much of their energy and thoughts to the issues of shelter and sustenance and to the awareness of how unpredictable their continued access to them might be. Stereotype threat is another prominent factor, making them susceptible to expressions of racism and profiling, underestimated and abandoned by teachers and bullied by peers. Living in shelters or being provided with places to live in poorer neighbourhoods can also lead to the unaccompanied refugee minors existing among either other refugees or people from low socioeconomic background and, by referencing their peers, constructing a view of the present and the future that does not involve high school achievements (Portes, Zhou 1993). Moreover, the school environment itself is often not conducive to nurturing motivation in unaccompanied refugee minors, the process of learning stymied by the language barrier or the teaching styles differing from what they might be used to back home, if they had the opportunity to partake in education in the first place.

Importantly, the youths' values might not even be aligned with what the Western schools can offer. Many of them come to the host country to work and send money back to their families, acting as full members of society within the framework of their culture, and the school environment appears to be completely irrelevant to their goals, not only not providing them with information and skills they consider useful, but actively taking away the time they could spend on tasks they do perceive as valuable to their life goals, increasing the cost.

It is important to note that if the expectancies of doing well on a task and the values of the task might not necessarily be in sync, and that can also impact the individual's motivation to engage with the task. If the task is valued but the expectancy of success is low, it can influence the individual's self-esteem in a negative way (Harter 1990), leading to potentially lasting consequences. If the expectancies and the values are misaligned as described, the individual can resolve this conflict either by improving the expectancies about their chances of success or lowering the value of the task; and as humans are wired to prefer not to do the tasks they expect to fail at, this can lead to avoidance of the problem, which rarely solves it. In practice and within the context of education, this kind of devaluing can lead to disidentification with school and even to dropping out, which can obviously have consequences both for the student's prospects in the host country as they don't partake in the bureaucratic system, and for their inclusion process as school is one of the main institutions playing part in it when it comes to younger individuals.

However, the idea of inclusion might also not hold much value for the unaccompanied refugee youths. As the process of attaining the official refugee status and the benefits and support that come with it can take a very long time, leaving them suspended in the liminal space of waiting for the immigration system's decisions, many run out of patience and leave to try their luck elsewhere, often

without discussing it with the social workers responsible for them. This can be easily explained by the 'cost' of staying and waiting and what seems to be wasting time vastly outweighing the nebulous and seemingly improbable utility value.

One of the ways to help with dealing with the uncertainty is shown to be the encouragement to develop a strong sense of racial/ethnic identity[12] as it is closely tied to self-worth and can help build a more robust constitution when the environment appears to be too unstable to securely rely on. Unfortunately, this can be best done by parents or other family members as carriers and representatives of the culture, ideally with strong emotional bonds with their children and seen as trustworthy authorities; however, unaccompanied refugee minors by definition are children without such adults near them, and the adults they do have – namely, the social workers or the teachers they manage to establish strong bonds with – do not belong to their culture and thus cannot organically encourage the development of their ethnic identity. Moreover, unaccompanied refugee minors living in shelter or in provided housing often share space with members of other cultures, united only by their identity facets of being refugees and minors. Although there can be people from the same country within the same group, mostly these groups are very heterogenous and thrown together by chance rather than given the opportunity to come together and grow organically.

Teachers, of course, play a very important role in the area of education and motivation. A teacher who is understanding and patient, enthusiastic and appreciative of the students' efforts has a much higher chance of motivating them than a teacher who is disconnected, dismissive, or even outright hostile toward them. The approach each individual teacher gravitates towards comes as a result of different factors, starting with their own manner of communication, the outlook on teaching, the stereotypes they might hold about different groups of students and their abilities, and ending with the materials they are supplied with and the support they receive. While for some it is possible to navigate a heterogenous and diverse group with high adaptability, those who aren't as adaptable can become helpless, demotivated, and cynical (Vansteenkiste, Aelterman, Haerens, Soenens 2019).

One of important aspects of motivation is contextual nurturance, where students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be satisfied (Ryan, Deci 2017). Autonomy here refers to the experience of feelings of volition, competence – to the experience of mastery, and relatedness to the experience of belonging and mutual care. Having these needs taken into consideration and taken care of leads to experiences that are inherently more satisfying, as people

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[12] Ethnic identity is an aspect of psychological identity, where identity is defined as the unique, continuous sense of self derived from the influences of the family and the extrafamilial world that needs to be both internally owned and externally validated (Erikson 1968), with the incongruence impacting psychosocial well-being and social adaptation; the former describes self-esteem and frequency of psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms, and the latter is measured as stressful experience adaptation (Neto 2002).

naturally engage in what is called need-crafting behaviour as they are inclined to complete tasks that serve to invoke the feelings of volition, mastery, and connection (Vansteenkiste, Aelterman, Haerens, Soenens 2019). However, being in an uncertain environment can threaten the fulfilment of these needs, leading to frustration. Autonomy frustration leads students to feeling like they are pushed in an undesired direction; competence frustration – to feelings of inadequacy and failure, and relatedness frustration to feelings of abandonment, any combination of these having the potential to naturally lead to demotivation and disidentification. Evidently, this is something an adaptable teacher can buffer or mitigate.

Vansteenkiste et al. (2019) propose a dual conceptualization of teacher approaches, sorting them along two axes: basic attitude and motivating practices. The basic attitude refers more to the general approach and rapport with their students, and the axis goes from need-supportive style and need-thwarting style, where the former reflects the teacher's ability to put the students' perspective central, whereas the latter leaves the teacher self-centred. In the absence of the basic attitude, for example due to burnout, the teacher might appear disconnected and mechanical, going through the motions of dispensing information and doing little else.

Motivating practices refer to the structure and the degree of autonomy that the teacher allows their students. Autonomy-supportive teachers focus on the students' emerging interests and values, following the flow and exercising curiosity and receptivity, as a result often establishing relationships of trust and empathy and allowing the students to experience a sense of ownership with regards to their thoughts and feelings. A teacher who is high on structure, on the other hand, adopts a basic attitude oriented at process and progress, trusting their students to be capable to advance their skills accordingly. They are able to create a predictable and safe environment, allowing their students to develop a feeling of competence.

The combination of these two axes produces eight main approaches: participative and attuning, guiding and clarifying, domineering and demanding, and abandoning and awaiting (Aelterman 2018). From the names alone it becomes clear that the second half of the list is not conducive to learning and heightens the risk of demotivation even in students in otherwise stable and/or need-supportive circumstances. The only prominent motivation to learn when the teacher is unhelpful, threatening, or both, would come from fear or spite, and while these can be effective short-term they are hardly sustainable or humane.

Out of the other four, guiding and attuning approaches are considered to be most effective in terms of need-nurturing, whereas participative and clarifying yield comparatively worse results. However, it is important to note that, while need-nurturing is an unequivocally desired aspect of the chosen approach, low structure vs. high structure approaches can have different effects on the students based on their needs. While in the Western world, a push has been made in recent years in

the direction of more relaxed and spontaneous, more follow-the-child approaches in education, especially of younger children (Montessori, Waldorf etc.), it might not benefit everyone equally. In case of unaccompanied refugee minors, for example, it is quite possible that being given too much freedom could lead to feelings of anxiety and exposure, as well to choice paralysis, without clear guidelines to lean on. A group of unaccompanied refugee minors could potentially find more benefit from a stricter, more structured approach than a group of their peers from the host culture, though it has to be noted here that 'strict' explicitly does not mean 'hostile'. School has the possibility to provide stability in a time where stability in other aspects of a refugee minor is hard to come by, as they are separated from their families and thrown into a drastically different culture; moreover, as already mentioned, it is an important vehicle of acculturation and inclusion, providing the refugee minor with the opportunity to acclimate to the new culture in a structured environment.

And so, if the teacher is capable of gaining an insight into and evaluating their students' values, preferences, and skills, which includes personal significance when attempting to understand the relevance of the potential tasks (Albrecht, Karabenick 2019), they then can, with enough flexibility, select the motivating approach and tailor the class experiences accordingly.

As an additional factor – and very important in the context of refugees in Europe – for refugees of African descent, it can be difficult to relate to white teachers (Taylor, Graham 2007)[13], and the language barrier plays a significant role in complicating establishing interpersonal connections. Moreover, teachers can be prone to adjusting their expectations for refugee students (again showing how one can mitigate the incongruence of expectancy and value) and giving them simpler tasks to complete. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as students are generally aware of the expectancies that teachers have for them and for their peers (Wigfield, Gladstone 2019), which can lead either to internalising the idea that they can only expect to do simpler tasks successfully, demotivating them from trying to do more, or to perceiving the simpler tasks as a sign of being underestimated or even insulted, further disidentifying them with the school environment.

On the other hand, placing too high expectations on the students can heighten their stress about performing the task well as they feel put under pressure, which can lead to them perceiving the cost of failure as too high compared to their ability belief to attempt doing the task.

All in all, it once again means that the teacher's sensitivity and ability to adjust their teaching style to the needs of their students is paramount to the students' ability belief, expectancy, and task relevance, and thus to their chances of success. It is important for the teacher to have a flexible approach and to be able to design the instructions to be relevant for their students by connecting their

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13 While American and European relationships with racism are not identical, it does not necessarily make this research irrelevant, in my opinion.

values and goals to the material (Wigfield, Gladstone 2019). Of course, it means working against the segmented flow of modern education which makes it harder to immediately see the value as it contrasts with what they learn outside of school (Albrecht, Karabenick 2019). And even though it can be harder for refugee students to relate to their teachers and to nurture bonds with them, if the teacher manages to earn their trust and become a figure of authority by being open and involved and able to consider the sociocultural aspects, their relevance claims can become more convincing to the students and make them more likely to approach the tasks with an open mind and, subsequently, to find value in completing them, to deem their ability in completing them high enough, and to successfully complete them as the result.

It is important to say something about interventions directed at motivation. Some of them are made with short term goals in mind, or just influencing the next step (like course performance), but being able to consider longer term effects and strategies exists in a reciprocal relationship with the ability to conceptualise a future, which is extremely important for unaccompanied refugee minors.

Hecht et al. propose a framework to describe the processes through which long-term effects may be achieved via motivation interventions. One such process refers to initiation or interruption of recursive processes, i.e. processes in which two or more components reciprocally influence each other in a feedback loop; an example would be that if a student is taught to see the value in a subject, they would spend more time studying it and subsequently discover more value in it. Another, nonrecursive, concerns 'domino effect', where the effects on the proximal outcome affect the distal outcome as well; a student who is encouraged to see value in a particular subject might going into that field in the future as their career choice. Finally, the third one would be related to latent intrapersonal effects, which includes changed habits or perceptions that inform how similar situations will be responded to in the future; a student who is taught to value a subject might grow accustomed to spending more time on studying it and less time on other, e.g. non-productive, activities (Hecht, Harackiewicz, Priniski, Canning, Tibbetts, Hyde 2019).

The types of interventions identified to have long-term effects are value affirmation, utility value, and social belonging (Hecht, Priniski, Harackiewicz 2019). Value affirmation concerns stereotype threat and is designed to reduce its effects by affirming the students' personal values outside the threatened domain, nurturing personal integrity and reducing the performance anxiety caused by the stereotype threat's spotlight. It interrupts the loop between threat perceptions and performance, which overtime helps better equip the individual with tools for dealing with stereotype threat (Cohen, Sherman 2014). Utility value intervention references Eccles' theory that students' decisions and behaviours are largely determined by their own expectations for success and predicted value of tasks (Eccles-Parsons, 1983). It works by facilitating the understanding of value of school tasks, as well as nurturing the students' ability belief.

Finally, social belonging intervention (Walton, Cohen 2007) is aimed at negative effects of uncertainty about one's belonging in academic spaces. 'Impostor syndrome' is a concept familiar to many, but might play an especially prominent role for people who feel underrepresented in a particular setting and worry about fitting in and building meaningful connections. This intervention is done by inviting students to consider their concerns as something everyone in their context experiences, and not just their own racial group, in order to disconnect the sense of belonging from the experiences of race-charged adversity.

This shows that interventions aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of school and promoting the positive ones by teaching the students how to navigate them are not only possible, but necessary and can lead to marked improvement long-term, encouraging the building of cognitive framework resilient enough for an individual to lean on in times of instability, which in turn also highlights the crucial role of motivation in these processes.

While it is mostly talked about children, it is important not to forget other participants in the refugee-host society relationship. In the modern world, in the time of globalisation, more and more teachers have to deal with highly heterogenous classrooms, which cannot help but complicate the teaching process because of the requirement to accommodate different needs and abilities. Being a good teacher means being attentive enough to be aware of this need, and flexible enough to switch strategies on the go in order to provide the most optimal learning experience.

This is, perhaps, the most prominent issue of modern teaching, but it is far from the only one. The commodification of education as the cultural outlook on it gradually shifts from the glorification of the past to something more commercialised and standardised seems to lead to teachers being treated as people providing a service – so, literally service workers – rather than equal members of a reciprocal relationship, signifying a turn towards the commodification of the service of teachers and so, the devaluation of their effort.

Moreover, teachers have historically referred to the issues of being underpaid and overworked, often left to fend for themselves both in terms of supplying their classrooms and settling conflicts with parents, with the administration either indifferent or actively unhelpful. Regardless of their own feelings about the higher goals of teaching, the way the system is organised impacts their sense of belonging, which can lead to burnout and demotivation. As a result, and if they don't receive the support needed to overcome it, they switch careers if possible, or become apathetic in their teaching, which impacts their teaching strategies described earlier. This is also relevant for other professionals in the scaffolding around unaccompanied refugee youths, such as social workers and lawyers – without a coherently built support system, without acknowledgement or value of their work and effort, their own motivational challenges may become impossible to overcome. Which, of course,

in turn jeopardises their charges' success, be it in the context of education or other components of the inclusion process.

In Portugal, the same core issues can be highlighted, namely the incongruence between the refugee students and the school system they are inserted into, and the lack of support and guidance that teachers feel, both in general and when trying to address it the issues arising in heterogenous classrooms. The incongruence comes largely from the differing sums of prior experiences refugee youths have with schooling and the resulting difficulty in assessing their knowledge levels and determining an appropriate level for them, as well as the language barrier, not to mention the general lack of security and assuredness they might be experiencing in a new environment. As such, simply approximating their education level is neither accurate, nor effective, nor enough. Could it perhaps be so surprising, then, that many of them might lose the motivation to go to school, a place where they feel unsupported and which doesn't offer them anything they consider to be of value to justify spending time on it? Could it be surprising that the teachers often feel unsure how to approach them?

There has been a push in the recent years in the direction of offering education as a way not only to get the more 'standardised' knowledge, but also (and some might argue, primarily) to build a cultural understanding and to facilitate inclusion of foreigners in the host communities. This cultural understanding is not meant to be a one-way road either: the idea of multicultural education is not only to recognise but to value the diversity on both sides. In my opinion, this isn't only about 'making a reciprocating effort' by the members of the host community, but also about actively enriching everyone's lives and experiences by thoughtfully coming into contact with different cultures and allowing them to expand one's worldview. Changing the conversation to show that this process benefits everyone and not only the refugees. The 'how' is the difficult question as it requires specificity and clarity, a translation of theory into practice, and that is where the cultural lens comes in: community involvement, celebration of festivities, sharing of conversations and food (Calapez, Vilarigues 2024).

CPR has done a lot of work with Isabel Galvão, who is the author of '*Caderno de Alfabetização para Falantes de Outras Línguas',* a project that consists of an exercise book (Galvão 2023a) for the students and a methodology book (Galvão 2023b) for those guiding them through the exercises. The approach presupposes that the individuals engaging with the exercises might not have gone to school or had spent little time there, or might not know the Latin alphabet (Rádio Renascença 2024). At the same time, it acknowledges that lacking these experiences or skills does not necessarily default the user to being a pre-teen — an age when Western children would start accumulating these experiences and building these skills as well — and is structured to treat the user with respect and support without infantilisation.

The methodology book, at the same time, offers clear step-by-step directives on how best to facilitate the learning process. For example, for the very first lesson there is a reminder that a set of school tools (a pencil, a pen, an eraser etc.) can be a source of excitement but also of shyness and uncertainty as it is not guaranteed that the student has used them before, and thus it would be important to take the time to familiarise them with the items and how to use them. At the same time, it reminds the teacher that some systems write right to left, which is worth keeping in mind when teaching someone to read and write in the Latin system. *'Occasionally, throughout the training, awkward moments will arise,'* the book says, both to caution the teacher against being blindsided by them so that they are able to defuse the situation mindfully, and, in my opinion, to normalise it too: yes, some awkwardness is to be expected when cultures collide under the circumstances of power imbalance of the participants, but it does not mean the end of the world — simply a learning moment for everyone involved.

Another example is a project that was introduced by NEW ABC *titled 'Pilot: Empowerment of unaccompanied migrant minors through multimodal co-creation in situations of errant mobility'* (NEW ABC 2020). It acknowledged that in the conditions of extreme vulnerability exacerbated by errant mobility that can lead to the failure of child protection systems and the predation of criminal networks, and aimed to empower the minors through multi-modal artistically focused workshops. One of such workshops was in photography, led by Prof. Santinho in 2023 in a small town on the outskirts of Lisbon (Santinho 2025).

The goal of the pilot was to foster feelings of trust and value among the youths, as well as enhance their access to informal education and thus to nurture their sense of empowerment. In the photography workshop, this was done, for example, through medium-appropriate means such as learning how to use perspective when taking pictures on a cell phone — aside from learning the technical skill, it also invited the youths to literally consider 'different perspectives' of seeing, and the surrounding discussions helped understand just how much personal experiences and cultural aspects can influence someone's angle of looking at the world — and how it can be consciously and mindfully changed. The youths that partook in the workshop were not all refugees, but immigrants and locals too, which meant that all sides could benefit from this experience and conversation.

Teachers are some of the more prominent members of the host country coming in contact with refugee minors, but they aren't the only ones. Social workers and lawyers also report having to work in demotivating circumstances, where they receive little to no encouragement for their work aside from the intrinsic value of acting in line with their morals. Social work is not exactly a lucrative occupation. Coupled with the problems many refugee minors deal with as well – the bureaucracy, the long waiting times, the difficult path of acculturating their charges – this means that social workers are extremely susceptible to burn out and have to take specific and deliberate actions to stave it off, like

making rules about availability on the work phone outside of working hours, or organising regular check-ins with the whole team to vent about the problems and celebrate the victories. The lawyers, in turn, are encouraged to take the *pro bono* cases as independent tasks outside of the working hours of the firms they have contracts with, and face the same issues of the system not being set up in a way that is conducive to streamlining the process in a way that benefits the minors and the workers. The feeling of 'fighting against the system' can be extremely demotivating on its own, especially when it's a 'chronic condition' of working in this field. Of course, each person can make the choice to devalue these tasks in order to stop doing them by finding a different career goal, or 'toughen up' and develop the robustness necessary for expending this effort without burning out, but the unfortunate aspect is that this choice has to exist in the first place.

Moreover, networking is becoming a more and more prominently valued component of life, especially when it comes to professional development, for example. And here it also constitutes a two-way street, where a member of the host community who is also an employer with a working opportunity is more inclined to offer this opportunity to someone who they think will provide a payoff, be it financial value for the business or, if applicable, the satisfaction of adhering to their morals and putting their trust into someone vulnerable and marginalised. The latter already puts refugees at a disadvantage due to various prejudices, and so, the employer's worldview is in direct interrelation with and has a direct impact on the refugee's perspectives in the new country.

To put it simply, the members of the host community are just as susceptible to the implications of the Expectancy Value Theory as anyone else — their motivation and subsequent action are influenced by their beliefs on the likelihood of success, as well as the value they place on achieving their goal, and it is just as applicable to their interactions with refugee minors, including providing emotional support and fostering emotional bonds, taking on cases that will not yield monetary results, and organising opportunities to support their inclusion process.

CHAPTER 5

Unaccompanied Refugee Youths and Their New Context in Europe and Portugal

This is where I was wrong, I think. In assuming that a person in such a situation would be go along with anything, any kind of entertainment or help. Of course they wouldn't – and shouldn't – be. I am only starting to grasp the intricacies of 'why'.

(Field notes, early days)

When refugee youths cross the border, they arrive not only in a new country, but in a new legal system of asylum process, almost an environment within an environment in and of itself. It is not something a median person has to encounter in their life, nor is it possible to learn much about it from a theoretical standpoint, from far away and without personally coming into contact with it, and even if a refugee has already attempted asking for asylum in one EU country and had their request rejected or suspended in 'legal limbo' and decided to try elsewhere, the system still differs across Europe, making it hard to predict exactly what one might come into contact with. Thus, assumptions are made in order to have something to build expectations on, and with assumptions comes the risk of disappointment and maybe even despair.

In this chapter, I am going to discuss several prominent aspects of refugee youths' experiences in Portugal, namely: asylum process, mental health, and culture and belonging, in order to fill out the environment in which their motivation is shaped and brought forward to guide their actions.

5.1. Asylum Process

The matter of documents, courts, and medical examinations came up quite frequently in my conversations with my interlocutors, which alone showed the prevalence of these topics in their lived experiences, as well as their overarching, almost looming quality and the impact they had. Early on during my visits to CPR, I came across a leaflet (available in Portuguese, English, and French) addressing a hypothetical refugee minor and describing the key points of the asylum-seeking process. In short, the asylum procedure consists of two stages: the first stage, ideally taking up no longer than thirty days, includes the evaluation of the refugee's application, done by AIMA and involving the analysis of the information both provided by the refugee and collected from other sources. By the end of that stage, a decision is made whether the applicant should be granted protection in Portugal. If the decision is negative, it may be appealed in court; if it is positive, the applicant receives a provisional residence permit which is valid for six months and must be renewed until the final decision on the

case. The second stage may take between six and nine months according to law (in practice it is a general guideline rather than a rule), by the end of which AIMA decides between rejecting the case after all, assigning a refugee status, or assigning subsidiary protection. At every step, the leaflet takes care to reiterate the applicant's rights, such as stressing that any shared information will be confidential, or that an interpreter 'should be provided'.

What one might glean from this description is how, for a lack of a better word, *tedious* the process is. The applicant is continuously locked into a waiting mode: waiting for the decisions, waiting for the deadlines, waiting to renew their provisional residence permit — or even to get it, having to content themself with a receipt. Waiting, too, for the next step if they would like to leave the country for any reason or any stretch of time, as this permit is only valid in Portugal and does not allow leaving it. A leitmotif that runs through the leaflet is the consistent reminder to tell someone from CPR if something happens — or doesn't happen. If the decision is negative, if the deadline has passed but nothing arrived, if the information received from AIMA is too unclear etc. It gave me the impression of constantly having to account for the ways the system might fail a minor, starting with its very structure and ending with what was possibly the result of situational mismanagement.

It was certainly a topic brought up a lot in our conversations and interviews. Quite often, an answer I would receive to a generic 'What have you been up to?' question would reference an AIMA appointment to renew the provisional residence permit, and the staff, too, remarked on this particular, difficult to describe but familiar to many, feeling of monotone enduring of dealing with the system. The staff, in particular, felt caught between it and their charges, knowing that they are looked to for protection, explanation, and answers, but often being unable to do anything but wait with them.

Many refugees go through monumental hardships before and after their journeys to Europe, and it can be tempting to assume that the challenges of their journeys are over now that they have arrived in the destination country, but the reality could not be more different. Aside from the issues that had led to them leaving their countries of origin and troubles encountered *en route*, refugee youths now have to reckon with matters of bureaucracy, discrimination, and cultural shock, while often having to deal with them without a robust support network. Bureaucracy in particular is something that I have the impression is overlooked in conversations about refugee experiences of integration — perhaps because it is not considered as something as dramatic as the flight to Europe (after all, the minors are supposed to be nominally safe and looked after now), or perhaps because many of us have the experiences of dealing with frustrating government bodies, confusing paperwork, or unhelpful visits to various offices, and this normalisation distorts our view of the problem when it might have a much more drastic effect on someone in an already vulnerable state to begin with.

In Portugal's section of the UNHCR website, a page can be found with general instructions and information addressing a hypothetical person seeking to apply for asylum while claiming to be

unaccompanied and underage. It describes the legal framework the person is predicted to have to participate in, mentions the matters of age assessment procedures, and provides information on where to find additional help. In the sections about the application interview, the article stresses the person's right to ask for an interpreter, as they are entitled to one on the basis of having the right to receive information in a language they understand (ironically, the section of the website related to Portugal and containing this page is only available in English). Furthermore, the right to say 'no' is reiterated prominently, especially in the section about age assessment, while underlining that the refusal 'may have consequences'[14] – and while Article 79(8) of the Asylum Act states that the refusal of medical examination must not determine the rejection of the application for international protection, in the 2023 AIDA Report UNICEF shares that the cases in which the applicant was deemed to be an adult (despite the inconclusivity of medical examination only being able to provide an 'age range' as an answer rather than a specific age) are referred to court for criminal investigation as it means they provided false age claims to the authorities.[15a]

Moreover, the instruction page stresses to the hypothetical claimant their obligation to tell the truth, share their life story, and advocate for themself if a need isn't met (such as the right to preserve dignity or to have an interpreter). Under ideal circumstances, one could perhaps expect an unaccompanied minor to be able to express themself clearly, concisely, and confidently; reality, however, paints this advice more as wishful thinking than easily followed guidelines. It appears to be unreasonable to expect a child – alone, in a new environment, in a stressful situation, in a vastly inferior position in terms of authority, information, and power compared to the official questioning them – to provide perfect and elaborate answers to every question and to speak up when something makes them uncomfortable rather than silently endure it out of fear of impacting their case.

While the guidelines for the children appear to be as clear as can be and still severely lacking in applicable value when it comes to more subjective matters such as demeanour and discomfort, the guidelines for the workers tasked with making the decision of refugee status are reported to be even more vague. Even the matter of age assessment, which should on paper be as objective as possible compared to, for example, the asylum interview, as it deals strictly with physical characteristics, does not have a specific identification mechanism defined nor a strict list of non-invasive procedures for the medical examination. Age assessment procedures can be triggered when there are significant doubts regarding the applicant's age based on their physical appearance or demeanour, but once again the objective criteria of what constitutes that reasonable doubt complicates the situation.[5b]

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[14] UNHCR: https://help.unhcr.org/portugal/asylum/information-for-unaccompanied-children-seeking-asylum-in-portugal/

[15a,b] AIDA https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/portugal/asylum-procedure/guarantees-vulnerable-groups/identification/#_ftnref40

When assessing an asylum application, one has to take into account 'all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin at the time of taking a decision on the application'[16]. One of the key aspects of the refugee determination process is figuring out whether the applicant would be facing persecution or serious harm if they were to return home, which necessitates gathering information on their country of origin in order to gain enough context to pass that judgement. Country of origin information can be difficult to gather, heterogenous, and changeable due to the dynamic sociopolitical landscape, and is compiled from sources such as government, NGOs, research institutes, and media (Feneberg, Gill, Hoellerer, Scheinert 2022). Individual expert assessments can be involved in the process of refugee status determination, which includes anthropologists[17]. With that information, a narrative, a court-specific 'reality' of the country of origin can be constructed to determine whether the applicant is to be granted refugee status, subsidiary protection, or neither.

Country of origin, however, is not the only block of information that is examined during the application. A monumentally important factor is the applicant's credibility, which is supposed to be assessed from their narrative, which is in turn compiled from country-of-origin information, asylum interview, and documentary evidence if available. The applicant is summarily assessed on the issue of telling the truth, and this evaluation is carried out based on the level of cohesion and detail of their narrative (Bodström 2020).

Credibility is assessed when the applicant's narrative is evaluated as internally cohesive, which is generally done during the asylum interview where they are to provide reasons for seeking asylum and to convey those reasons in a way that is consistent, coherent, and detailed (Shumam, Bohmer 2004); when the provided information is compared to the available information on the country of origin as well as any available documentation; and when the societal context of the applicant's origin is evaluated (Wikström, Johansson 2013). Interestingly, UNHCR guidelines for assessing the credibility and robustness of asylum claims list 'Plausibility' as one of the five credibility indicators, on par with the aforementioned high level of detail and the consistency of oral presentation with available documentation.[18] The same document quotes that UNCHR's research brought up 'numerous examples

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[16] Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast) [2011] OJ L337/9 (EU Qualification Directive) art 4(3)(a).

[17] As such, anthropologists are 'culturally' in a challenging position as people responsible for actual decision making are interested in the provided information about the complex situation in the country of origin to be reducible to a simple binary evaluation, which by default contradicts the nature of anthropology and ethnography. Thus, anthropologists are expected to provide 'objective' cultural knowledge which is by definition oxymoronic, to answer the question of the cultural implications for the credibility of the asylum applicants' stories (Feneberg, Gill, Hoellerer, Scheinert 2022).

[18] UNHCR:
https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/sites/default/files/aldfiles/UNHCR%20credibility%20assessment%20554c9aba4.pdf

of decisions in which statements submitted by an applicant were considered not to be plausible for reasons which suggest that decision-makers relied on this notion *intuitively*[19], based on subjective assumptions, preconceptions, conjecture, speculation, and stereotyping', admitting the inherent challenges in using these credibility indicators as assumption-based.

In assessing internal credibility, three factors are relied on: detail, interpretation, and personal profile. Detail, self-evidently, is an assessment of whether the account is rich in detail or too broad and general and lacking the 'feel' of a personal experience, where the latter can lead to the conclusion that the applicant is lying. Interpretation assesses the validity of the applicant's interpretation of events – this means that while the officials evaluating the case might agree that the applicant is telling what they believe to be true, the officials might believe that the provided reason is incorrect. Finally, profile evaluates the importance of the applicant in the eyes of the persecution, which generally relates to politically charged cases. Naturally, the decisions based on these factors are often rooted in interpretation of the events and their implications by the applicant but, more crucially for the decision, by the official.

It seems that successful asylum narratives must show not only a fear of persecution with substantial grounds for it but also identify the agents of the persecution and the reasons for it. This leads to the applicant having to make assumptions as, in most cases, perpetrators of violence don't always make it a point to announce clearly and concisely who they are and what they are after – but more importantly, the applicant's assumptions have to align with the assumptions made by the officials in order to be deemed plausible, making one more valuable than the other and leading to the official's claims to be treated as facts in the asylum decision (Bodström 2020).

In an asylum interview, there is an inherent power imbalance: the asylum seeker is in, by definition, a weaker position of their uncertain status, which can be further compounded by differences in age and the lack of a support system if the applicant is an unaccompanied minor, language barriers, accumulated psychological strain of the journey and from having to navigate these new and likely unprecedented situations, as well as the fact that the interviewer knows what questions they are going to ask and what answers and with what level of detail they expect to hear to count the interview as 'credible', where the interviewee likely does not (Ramezankhah 2017). In a way, applicants are expected to provide a 'performance' (McKinnon 2009) of someone capable of narrating their life story in a cohesive and coherent way, with the perfect amount of details (and with the aforementioned appropriate level of subjective fearfulness), and to have it be consistent with any and all information accessible to the court on relevant topics.

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[19] Emphasis mine.

As such, there are multiple factors putting the applicant in a comparatively weaker position, and the same factors can shape their ability to provide that performance. Socioeconomic background, age, trauma-informed behaviour, distrust of authority figures, even the layout of the room and the proceeding of the interview (Gibb 2019) – all of these, and many others, inform the way an applicant acts, but are not necessarily taken into account when evaluating their credibility (Bodström 2020). Another complication is the chimera of a 'well-rounded fear of being persecuted', as it requires the applicant both to veritably show subjective fear but also to provide objective reasons that validate that fear (Hathaway, Foster 2014). The decision maker must thus evaluate their plausibility and determine whether they are 'satisfied' that the applicant can demonstrate both subjectivity and objectivity (Kinchin, Mougouei 2022), and the lack of standard criteria means the official's need to invoke personal judgement, perceptions, and bias as a scaffolding. Even the necessarily objective language that avoids calling these assumptions a 'gut feeling' still describes the same phenomena, providing 'objective surrogate indicators of supposedly subjective fear' (Hathaway, Foster 2014).

A core issue is that any perceived 'lack of interest' or 'lack of initiative' shown by the applicant and interpreted by the official in accordance with their own assumptions (Kinchin, Mougouei 2022) can have explanations completely unrelated to the notion of lying in the asylum application interview (Liodden 2021). Depression and PTSD, for example, are shown to be able to severely impact memory recall, especially specific memories compared to extended ones (Graham, Herlihy, Brewin 2014), potentially even to the point of the applicant being unable to respond at all. But even so, the act of remembering a traumatic event does not equate being able to talk about it in a cohesive and coherent manner (McFadyen 2018), meaning that at multiple steps of communicating – hearing and understanding the interviewer's question, recalling the relevant memory, expressing it the 'correct way' – the interviewee is at a severe disadvantage and thus at a high risk of not 'delivering' the information the way they are expected to, if at all, which, in an ideal world, should not and would not paint their experience as invalid.

Moreover, the way the questions are framed is important too and can have an impact on recall. If the interviewer poses a question that is too broad, the applicant might not be able to 'guess' that they are expected to go into deep detail (Bodström 2020). If the interviewer chooses not to ask more specific questions and doesn't push for more details (for example, perhaps, because of their preconceived notion that the interviewee does not appear credible), then the potential resulting superficiality of the applicant's answers hardly reflects the depth of their actual experience or the ability to talk about them – only that they weren't clued in on the degree to which they were expected to 'perform' and volunteer information (Kinchin, Mougouei 2022).

Of course, it would be incorrect not to point out the personal and cultural aspects that influence whether the person is willing to volunteer the requested information. While trust is still

developing (which can take a long time that it might not have, and is further impacted by the described power imbalance), the applicant might be vary of the interviewer or embarrassed to talk about certain topics. It could be culturally inappropriate or embarrassing to discuss one's sexual orientation and history (even when it involves rape, or where the sexual orientation might be grounds for persecution in the home county), or in cultures where head of the family is responsible for speaking for other family members, women would feel insecure in revealing information without the guidance of said head of the family. Here, even the gender of the interviewer and/or the interpreter might be a significant enough factor to further demotivate them to talk about sexual or other experiences, the importance of sharing enough details trumped by discomfort and shame (RAIO Directorate 2019). Not to mention that recounting difficult triggers an emotional response, possibly as potent as it was during the experience of trauma (Santinho 2011), and reliving these emotions and becoming retraumatised is both, understandably, something a person would want to avoid and, in my opinion, should not be a prerequisite for continuously proving the validity of one's past and present claims.

Cases that involve children have their own particularities. What LeVine (2007) refers to as the 'universalist account of childhood' has already been critiqued earlier, but it bears repeating that in our modern Western understanding of a child, they are someone who requires protection, might be unable to define their own best interests, is less capable of dealing with the hardships of forced migration, and does not have full agency over their life (Giannopoulou 2019). This already can impact the relationship between the asylum-seeking child and the system, as is it not implausible that they might be coming from a culture that defines childhood differently from a numeric age, and to be forced into the constraints of the Western definition might prove to be a point of friction as it creates tension between a child's self-perceived agency and the image of passivity and helplessness imposed by the system of the destination country. The child thus is not unlikely to see the adults as unhelpful and the system as hostile, perceiving 'a tension between [their] agential capabilities and the passive and immobile child that [they are] expected to be' (Giannopoulou 2019), which can further impact their motivation to engage with the system, influencing both the 'performance' of their narrative and the overall desire to stick it out through the asylum application process instead of running away and potentially trying elsewhere. And, of course, this in turn greatly undermines their trust in the process which is a crucial component of its effectiveness (Hynes 2008). Thus, their testimony has to be treated carefully and with full awareness of this context as they might appear uncooperative or ambiguous, or refuse to define themself as vulnerable unless they are under the impression that it might help speed up the legal procedures (Giannopoulou 2019). Ironically, the perception of children as helpless and incapable of work becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as regarding them as such prohibits that same work activity that they might desire and keep them 'trapped' in the institution. This tension between self-perceived agency and the passive child image imposed by institutions can directly affect

motivation. Young refugees may feel pressured to perform according to external expectations, undermining both their trust in the system and their willingness to actively engage in educational opportunities or other forms of participation.

Legal reasoning dominates evidence – evidence can be highly malleable, and every piece of it can be interpreted in a way that allows it to be used to support diametrically opposite claims. This can be done based on assumption and facilitated with techniques like information framing, selective inclusion, and minor modification of provided sources. Simply put, it seems to be largely guided by confirmation bias and has the capacity of making any piece of information malleable enough to fit the predicted outcome. Meaning, to reiterate, that country of origin information is applied according to already pre-assumed positions rather than allowing the evidence to test these positions (Feneberg, Gill, Hoellerer, Scheinert 2022), which provides rich breeding grounds for confirmation bias in regard to stereotyping and discrimination.

Moreover, the interview record used to determine the applicant's internal credibility is recontextualised for the asylum decision, where it might be a few pages long but never as long as the interview record, meaning that this presents an opportunity to select the presented information, rearrange, or exclude – filtering it according to the biases and pre-assumptions of the person doing the recontextualisation (Bodström 2020).

Smith-Khan (2017) argues that the officials involved in asylum decision making are presented as objective and neutral actors when assessing and making the decision, meaning that, when assessing applicants' credibility, the decision makers are suggested to be neutral, objective, and knowing the 'truth' whereas the asylum seekers are prone to telling lies (Bodström 2020). However, even though the institutional variations across country borders may be understandable, there also appears to be a great deal of variation in refugee status determination for the same groups of applicants within the same country (Ramji-Nogales, Schoenholtz, Schrag 2009). Rehaag (2008) goes as far as to call it the 'luck of the draw' of having one's asylum case be assigned to a particular decision maker.

What leads to this level of personal discretion that can direct two people to different decisions about the same case? The lack of clear guidelines – and the resulting necessity to rely on subjective ones – seems to be the answer, where decision makers even within the same institution may vary depending on factors such as their experience, the number of applicants in a given year, and the political landscape (Liodden 2017). A certain degree of discretion is self-evident and self-explanatory, as the decision makers are required to apply the generalised word of law to a very specific and individual set of circumstances (Lipsky 2010).

Put simply, decision makers are required to make high stake decisions based on scarce information and balance the dynamic goals of protection and control informed by the state, assisted by the very limited guidance of the ambiguous asylum law (Liodden 2021) which, while listing the

credibility indicators, does not specify just how consistent or plausible the applicant's narrative has to be in order to be considered credible (Sweeney 2009).

This is a set-up that leads to having to lean on discretion, which in turn can be taxing on the human mind. Naturally, this leads to decision makers seeking ways to reduce the level of that discretion as a measure of self-protection, which can be done using different tools.

An institution is also, in a sense, a work community one can be socialised into. Which means that a decision maker can orient themself in accordance with their peers and superiors (Miaz 2017), learning from their observations what constitutes a 'correct' decision. More than that, dealing with a number of similar cases can blur the finer points, causing the decision makers to create and lean on stereotypes to facilitate easier decision making, using 'how things were done previously' to guide their present decisions (March, Heath 2010) in what could be aptly called a 'tradition'. To further this idea, the practice seems to involve a certain degree of tacit knowledge that is 'difficult to articulate' (Polanyi 1966), which seems consistent with something related to a culture. An additional factor could be the 'culture of disbelief, where case workers are inclined to view asylum applicants as someone prone to telling lies (Souter 2011), which shapes their preconceptions. Naturally, this has the potential of influencing a larger number of cases which might not necessarily be grouped the same way by a different official in a different institution, which calls into question the validity of such categorisations.

Moreover, in relation to country-of-origin information assessment in particular, Lawrance and Ruffer (2015) point out a concern about a trend towards the standartisation of knowledge and increased dependence on expert testimony, both of which reduce a decision maker's discretion. By simplifying the choice, discretion hereby helps to reduce the *need* for discretion (Lempert 1993).

Perhaps astonishingly, a study done by Schneider and Wottrich (2017) reflects that among German case workers there is a belief that 'this is and should remain a matter of personality and individual style', which could not be a more obvious way to showcase how much individual interpretation and discretion is involved in the refugee status determination process and how varied the results may be.

Interestingly, it can be well pointed out that to a degree all communication is based on assumptions – otherwise we would have to continuously clarify everything we say without having the 'common sense' on which to base the communication (Fairclough 2003). In asylum applications, the applicants are expected to take a chain of events and explicitly link it into a cohesive narrative, but doing so necessitates a level of assumption making that is contextually based. The decision maker, on the other side, regardless of the number of expert sources and their quality, is by default bound by their personal and ethnocentric perspective, not having the full context, perhaps not even putting the same meaning into the same words as the applicant, be it due to language barriers or sociocultural contexts – and thus is not unlikely to make a completely different set of assumptions about the

presented events – or, at the very least, different enough to count it as grounds to reject the asylum claim.

An argument can be made that perhaps artificial intelligence could help reduce the 'human error' factor in evaluating asylum claims – but the issue with AI is that, as it is still trained on human data, it is much more likely to replicate that human error instead of being able to transcend it (Kinchin, Mougouei 2022). Using it for refugee status determination cases would require proofing by humans who are capable of distinguishing the nuance of individual circumstances where AI would fail to read emotion and consider traumagenic impact on memory or cultural impact on its expression, which puts us right back to the matter of human discretion.

All in all, despite the existing apparatus of legal framework, at the end of the day decision makers are thrown all the way back to relying on their 'gut feeling' and 'emotional intelligence' (Schneider 2019), which calls into question the validity of the resulting decisions – but, as Liodden (2021) puts it, perhaps it may be unreasonable to expect justice from a system that is itself the product of fundamental inequality.

What this means is that European migration services often make decisions subjectively, which might even be expressed in their self-reports, and that can be reflected in treating the minors with distrust concerning the truthfulness of their statements regarding their 'real age' and other aspects of their stories (Rebelo 2024). Everything the refugees project with their appearance, behaviour, speech: from the way they look someone in the eye to the specific words (in what might be their third or fourth language!) to which they choose to reduce their difficult experiences, is examined, weighed against the workers' experiences, and judged based on the cultural background of the workers and the assumptions they make about the cultural backgrounds of the refugees.

In Portugal, Rebelo et al. highlight the concept of 'refugeeness' – a term coined to describe the filter of the refugee status though which the refugees are perceived by the receiving side (Rebelo, Santinho, Cunha, Kordia, Amelung, de Figueiredo, Gomes, Kweh, Matondo, Mukinay 2025). Refugees are expected to perform in a certain way – to demonstrate politeness, gratitude, and to supplicate for help. Even if they aren't aware of the term itself, the refugees themselves are still certainly aware of these expectations and so, can choose to conform to them in order to heighten their chances at a positive outcome, putting their experiences and self-expression through this filter in order to approach the platonic ideal of a refugee that the host community expects to see and interact with. How and if it impacts the truthfulness of the result is a matter of semantics, but personally I find the very need for this practice deeply ironic and dehumanising. There is also a degree of information omission described by some refugees in Laura Cardoni Ruffier's thesis (2021), where they would be left in the dark by case workers or technicians of Social Security (ISS), even about matters as important and deeply pertaining to precarity as the accommodation to which they would be transferred or the amount of financial

support they would be receiving. To me personally, this gives the impression of being the result of many factors, but perhaps it is not outlandish to suggest that one of them could be this aforementioned 'refugeeness', where the refugees are presumed to be grateful for any help at all, so it shouldn't matter much if they are kept out of the loop about it until it happens. The issue is further exacerbated by the responses from the institutions often not only being delayed, but varying greatly from municipality to municipality, which adds to the confusion and uncertainty. Additionally, the lack of regulation means that interpretations and applications can vary even from agency to agency (Souza 2017). The lack of this information and the inability to rely on the available services can lead the refugees to seek it through channels such as networks of people in similar situations, which then heightens the risk of them being taken advantage of by malicious agents – whereas not taking that risk may leave them paralysed with indecision.

Refugees who have had the chance to experience the asylum process in two or more European countries also reflect on the particularities of the situation in Portugal. The system appears difficult to interact with and get help from, and having a certain view of the asylum process in other countries can build expectations which are then not necessarily met in Portugal, as the system is not uniform across the Member States and is subject to each country's specificities. Moreover, the Portuguese model of grassroot solidarity, which can to a degree counteract the harm that the system causes, struggles with lack of funding and case overload which leads to only being able to offer limited support (Rebelo 2024).

Naturally, all of these issues pose significant obstacles on the path to inclusion in the Portuguese society, acting as demotivation and stress factors, something either to avoid or to contend with at the expense of already very limited resources.

5.2. Mental Health Struggles

I think it's mentality. Some refugee in CPR, I see one refugee, he is from Guinea-Bissau, they will have mentality problems. Because they don't know what they want, what they come here for. He don't understand, they don't go to school, they don't go to sleep. He don't have future. He don't have to think about dreams: Why I come here? Why I leave my country? And I think, some have mental problem, and some understand.

(Interview with Abed)

5.2.1. Factors impacting mental health of unaccompanied refugee youths

In my fieldwork experience, I observed the minors at the shelter feeling reluctant about engaging with Portuguese healthcare. When I was talking with Bakary, he shared that his chest hurt sometimes, which he attributed to when he fell onto the roots of a mango tree back home. He said that his friends

carried him home and someone massaged his chest, remarking that in the morning there was no need to go to the hospital, but now his chest still hurts sometimes. But rather than going to a doctor, he prefers to persevere through the pain, as it apparently goes away after some time.

> *But when I start run, my chest start pain. That is difficult, I don't understand what happen. That is the problem, I don't know, is that…because I fall off the mango tree that pain is coming back? I don't know actually, I don't know.*
>
>> But do you want to maybe talk to *[staff member]* and get an appointment about this? If it's something that worries you?
>
> *Noo, don't worry, I will manage it! (laughs uncomfortably)*
>
>> Yeah, but you don't *have* to manage it. You have the system here, to try and get help from.
>
> *Yeah, but it's okay. It's only… Only when I start to run, I feel the pain. Or when I start going to the gym, work with heavy things, and then…pain.*
>
>> But you like going to the gym, you like running, right?
>
> *Yeah, I like to go, but because of that pain I stopped now.*
>
>> So then it's keeping you from doing something you like. Maybe then you don't have to manage?
>
> *No– guh– aah– some people…when I'm doing this thing, then it's paining me, but if I go on, it will be remove. So.*
>
> (Interview with Bakary)

When we happened to touch upon the matter of mental health, Bakary was just as reluctant if not more so, attributing his issues to lack of sleep and viewing it as the root cause and not as a consequence of something else. 'Is for crazy people, I'm not crazy,' he said, and when I shrugged and remarked that people go to therapy just for a 'tune-up' sometimes, he shook his head and reiterated that he isn't crazy, there is no need for him to talk to anyone. And as he was obviously uncomfortable with this topic, I dropped it in favour of something else.

Bakary's distrust of adults also encompassed the teaching staff. When I asked him if there was a particular member of the faculty at the school he went to that he could come to with any questions or issues, Bakary confirmed that there was, but when I asked if he'd ever used that opportunity, he replied emphatically, *'No, no no no, I never do that'.*

The staff of CPR also confirmed this phenomenon, saying that psychological help is something they offer, however very few youths accept this kind of help; they explain it as the youths either not understanding what it is for, not trusting the professionals involved, or not wanting to accept the heavily stigmatised notion of needing this kind of help in the first place, which seemed to make it something much harder to sell for the staff.

Mental health issues can be classified according to numerous systems, such as the pathologising/moralising/medicalising/psychologising dimensions proposed by Haslam (2005), with possible additional considerations of stress or spiritual concepts. The issue with this paradigm, however, is its static nature, whereas we have historically documented shifts in public and cultural perception of certain illnesses from something based on an individual's intentional and moralised choices and actions to something closer to being based on psychological issues (Chambers, Rueda, Baker, Wilson, Deutsch, Raeifar, Rourke, Stigma Review Team 2015).

These shifts happen gradually, so it is perhaps not surprising that in many countries of origin of refugees, mental illness can be heavily stigmatised as well (Delgado, Jones, Mojdeh Rohani 2005; Fassaert, de Wit, Verhoeff, Tuinebreijer, Gorissen, Beekman, Dekker 2009). The cumulative image of a mentally ill person is someone that is unkempt, in a poor physical state, a social outcast. This leads to minimising or rejecting one's own mental health issues, out of fear being put in a 'crazy hospital' (Majumder, O'Reilly, Karim, Vostanis 2014), incarcerated, or even excluded from one's social group of fellow refugee youths if it was to be found out that they were seeking help (Majumder 2019). Even when it is possible to acknowledge having mental health issues, the youths might still be expressing negative attitudes towards mental health and using derogatory language to describe it: 'mentals', 'crazy' etc. (O'Reilly, Taylor, Vostanis 2009) – because the term 'mental', to them, is a negatively charged word (Chase 2013). For unaccompanied refugee youths, the stigma of mental health illness forms part of the 'triple stigma' together with being unaccompanied and having the status of a refugee, which only compounds the difficulty of deciding to access treatment (Rebelo 2024).

CRC (Committee on the Rights of the Child) mandates that States 'ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child'[20], where this development is seen as a personal right and refers not only to developing from a child into an adult, but as something that occurs in a prolonged fashion throughout a person's life as a child, meaning that at its core it is a right to develop as a child, not only to become an adult (Peleg, Tobin 2019). Development is comprised of many aspects, which include 'psychosocial well-being' and are ensured by providing a supportive and safe environment. This environment can be built from components such as overarching policies, access to education and healthcare, and reduction of neglect. As it is in the best interests of the child and UNHCR notes that only other rights-based circumstances might override these best interests (UNHCR 2008), a child's legal status of immigrant/refugee/asylum seeker cannot be given more priority than their survival and development.

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[20] OHCHR: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

On paper, this is good news as refugee minors, and especially unaccompanied ones, should be entitled to and be able to receive upon their arrival all the help and support necessary for their development. Research shows that up to a third of asylum-seeking and refugee minors could be affected by emotional or behavioural problems and disorders (Kien, Sommer, Faustmann, Gibson, Schneider, Krczal, Jank, Klerings, Szelag, Kerschner, Brattström, Gartlehner 2018). Reasons for that can be numerous and varied, spanning their pre-flight life to the journey to Europe to the difficulties experienced upon and after arrival, all of them capable both of dealing their own damage and compounding the pre-existing one. The range of traumatic events can include persecution, abduction, or death of family members (possibly directly witnessed), war[21], forced labour, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, restriction of freedom, insecurity of not having basic needs met, displacement, racism and discrimination (Hopkins, Hill 2008).

Moreover, being unaccompanied is an important risk factor (Derluyn, Broekaert 2008), placing unaccompanied refugee minors at a higher risk of developing behavioural and emotional problems than their accompanied counterparts (Bean, Derluyn, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Broekaert, Spinhoven 2007), as well as suffering more from post-traumatic symptoms in comparison (Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, Cunniff 2008), with common disorders being troubles with sleep and concentration, as well as mood swings (Chase, Knight, Statham, British Association For Adoption & Fostering 2008). Separation from parents or other relatives is often named as a critical factor putting unaccompanied refugee minors' healthy development at risk, as it can signify loss of both the sense of security that comes with having a trusted adult to rely on (Wernesjö 2012), and the connection of one's cultural roots as family is one of the key pathways for transmission of cultural knowledge. Besides that, it can constitute an emotional loss and a stimulus for learning to take on responsibility for one's life that the minor may not yet be ready for[22].

The process of seeking asylum itself can also present a traumatising experience (Thomas, Byford 2003), which includes such issues as inadequate care, invasive and potentially (re)traumatising medical examinations, isolation, separation, and racism. A prominent issue refugees have to contend with is the so-called 'legal limbo' which is a phenomenon that occurs when a person is kept waiting on the court decision after applying for refugee status, for their documents to be issued or renewed, for their rejections to be appealed. These waiting periods can happen in shorter bursts of a few months,

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[21] As one of the more prominent reasons for flight from countries like Afghanistan or Somalia, it could explain the prevalence of PTSD diagnosed in studies with participants from these countries over other disorders (Kien, Sommer, Faustmann, Gibson, Schneider, Krczal, Jank, Klerings, Szelag, Kerschner, Brattström, Gartlehner 2018).
[22] However, it is important to remember that parents or family in general may as well be a good reason to flee – one of my interlocutors, Nyang from Gambia, shared that his main and initial reason to leave was to escape his father's abuse over Nyang's choice of a secular school over a religious one, so it could be argued that in some cases the idea of the minor being accompanied or not might be much more ambivalent than initially assumed.

keeping the person 'tied' both in legal terms (waiting to gain access to the important elements of support network such as healthcare, or waiting to be allowed to travel legally) and in terms of the persisting discontinuity and the shrinkage of the planning horizon as they cannot be certain of their near future and cannot tangibly influence it. Legal limbo can be used to discourage immigration by demotivating the applicants from trying to apply for protection or to persist with appeals if it is denied, exhausting them in 'renewable uncertainty' (Lelliott 2022). The resulting delay in integration provokes and exacerbates anxiety and stress (Kohli, Kaukko 2017) with both short- and long-term impact on mental health and development (Vervliet, Lammertyn, Broekaert, Derluyn 2013).

Poor social support and integration are some of the key determinants for poor mental health outcomes in unaccompanied refugee minors (Jore, Oppedal, Biele 2020; Müller, Gossmann, Hartmann, Büter, Rosner, Unterhitzenberger 2019; Schick, Zumwald, Knöpfli, Nickerson, Bryant, Schnyder, Müller, Morina 2016) as they are denied an active role in the process of inclusion (O'Reilly 2018), and withholding the opportunity to access this social support appears to be a violation of the CRC mandate, as 'legal limbo' does not constitute a rights-based circumstance that would override their right to survival and development.

Overall, forced migration is a source of stress, and stress manifests on different levels, such as emotional, cognitive, and behavioural (Salaberria, Polo-López, Saez, Berry 2015). Moreover, it exhausts. Refugees are generally expected or even obligated to rapidly start to participate in the host society – however, engaging in the process of integration may require a level of interpersonal and cognitive capabilities that a stress-impaired person may not be capable of (Schick, Morina, Mistridis, Schnyder, Bryant, Nickerson 2018).

5.2.2. Expectations vs. reality in mental healthcare

Many unaccompanied refugee minors and youths would benefit from help with mental health issues, but even if they manage to access the services and find it possible to look past the cultural stigma around it, it is not guaranteed that they will be able to gain anything from the way this help is offered in Western countries. In the West, treatments tend to include psychological, activity-based, and pharmacological components, but the latter is generally used either in more severe cases or in situations where 'talking therapy' has failed to produce a tangible result. However, refugee youths may not recognise talking therapy as beneficial, seeing medication as the ultimate goal of therapy (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018) – which makes sense if they perceive mental illness as something with a somatic basis, but goes in contradiction with the Western therapy model which does not consider medication to be a long term or sole solution in many cases (Majumder, O'Reilly, Karim, Vostanis 2014).

So, instead of what seems to be the straightforward solution of medication, youths are invited to talk, which leads to dredging up painful memories for seemingly no reason as doing so in slow-paced talking therapy doesn't lead to immediate relief and is instead perceived as regressing (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018). They expect to discuss their current problems connected with immigration of physical health, such as education or sleep, not seemingly unrelated past events that only serve to upset them. To make matters worse, the application of the Western model leads to culturally charged discrepancies between specialists and their patients. The terminology that the specialist is trying to communicate in may not have equivalents in the patient's native language and thus lack sense to them (Majumder 2014, 2019), rendering the Western therapy model meaningless (Lynch 2001); on the other side, the patient's culturally informed view on mental illness may include ideas such as spirit possession which requires traditional healing methods, an idea largely unacceptable in the Western model, which leaves the patient feeling misunderstood and like their needs aren't being met (Satinsky, Fuhr, Woodward, Sondorp, Roberts 2019). This is further supported by the research done by Moleiro and Roberto (2021) the statistics of the conducted study shows that, while the relationship with health practitioners was evaluated positively, most of the study participants did not believe in their ability to understand their contexts and values, nor to solve the presented health problems. Furthermore, there are often differing frameworks for evaluating one's good or poor health. Good health can be described as the capability to function in everyday life, while poor mental health can be believed to be caused by other problems in life (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018) or reduced solely to physical symptoms (Majumder, O'Reilly, Karim, Vostanis 2014). The severity also plays a role – if a youth believes that a mental illness can only mean a severe disorder, then they might evaluate their state as falling short of it, meaning they aren't dealing with a mental illness after all (Rebelo 2024).

Aside from preconceived ideas on mental health and therapy, a refugee youth might also have preconceived ideas on the mental health practitioners themselves, often influenced by gender and ethnicity. For example, if the specialist presents as a woman, refugee boys may be further disinclined to talk about their problems with her as their culture dictates that women should be protected from distress (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018) – what is, to them, a common courtesy when interacting with a woman, becomes an active hindrance in therapy. Furthermore, a patient-specialist relationship is always an asymmetrical one, and the patient being a refugee and a minor adds to the authority disparity. They might feel infantilised or patronised, or have their agency jeopardised, or like the practitioners don't understand their needs – the latter potentially exacerbated by the language barrier, starting with the asymmetry in terminology and ending with actually having a third party present during sessions for interpreting reasons (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018). And it can

never be forgotten that they might be under the impression that what they say or do while in therapy (as well as admitting the need for it in the first place) may impact their legal status in the country.

At the end of the day, this lack of mutual understanding, whether based on the language barrier, these 'incompatibilities', irreconcilable dynamics of power and authority, or something else, often leads to treatments that start and end with medication. And while medication is undoubtedly an important and sometimes even crucial possible component of treatment, it is often most effective and has a lasting effect when administered in combination with other methods, such as therapy. And where the gap of understanding and common references cannot be bridged, refugees turn to complementary medicines and treatments offered by other immigrants and sold, for example, in Martim Moniz or Rossio in Lisbon, which serve not only their direct purpose of healing, but also as symbolic references to shared meanings, helping to reinforce one's sense of identity (Santinho 2011).

The social context of the receiving side matters too. As discussed previously, there is a dichotomy of incompatible concepts, where refugee youths are seen both as representatives of 'dangerous migrants' with all the xenophobia and dehumanisation that come from that, and sanctified vulnerable children in need of protection above all else (Chase 2013). This leads to unclear and vague policies with blindness to needs beyond basic survival (CMW, CRC 2017) and often lacking clear strategies of how to apply the general word of law in specific and individualised situations. Health professionals tend to be underprepared when treating unaccompanied refugee youths, particularly in the context of performing invasive procedures without considering the condition of vulnerability (Roberto, Moleiro, Lemos 2020) but also in terms of being uninformed, unable, or unwilling to grasp the lived contexts of their patients in order to understand their concepts of health and disease and to collaborate on a solution by casting a broader and more holistic cross-cultural net instead of pulling the patients along the tracks of Western biomedicine (Santinho 2011). Perhaps part of the reason for it would be the necessity for the professional to relinquish their position of authority and so, to let go of some of their power and control, but in my opinion it is worth asking oneself if the end goal is to uphold the authority — or to help the patient. At the same time, there is a degree of exoticism in interactions between healthcare professionals in Portugal and their patients, where it seems like the former give up on understanding the latter in advance, citing cultural incompatibilities (Santinho 2011).

Still, professionals admit that assessment and care of refugee youths in the mental health department requires special knowledge and skill (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018), as they often do not feel confident in helping with the needs of refugees (Goldin, Hägglöf, Levin, Persson 2008) as they lack the cultural common ground, can't deal with language barriers, are simply too removed from their lived experiences to understand them etc. But if the specialist is not prepared to work with a refugee youth and unable to understand their situation, this may lead to dissatisfaction with therapy and disengagement (Zijlstra, Menninga, Van Os, Rip, Knorth, Kalverboer 2018), which lowers the

chances of the youth to try again in the future as their experience now colours their impression of and opinion on mental health care.

In terms of motivation, it is perhaps unsurprising that talking therapy provided in Western countries is not met with enthusiasm in many cases. The discrepancy between what the refugee youths expect vs. what they get exacerbates the already prominent issue of low motivation to engage with the mental health services due to all the reasons listed above, leading to disengaging from therapy, which is perceived as meaningless and retraumatising (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018), opting instead for suppressing traumatic past experiences and turning to solving current and future problems instead (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018). Simply put, it may be comparatively easy for them to want to turn their attention to and put their energy into something they consider more tangible and useful, where they don't feel unsupported and abandoned; or if they proceed with therapy sessions, it may be for reasons of seeing it as part of the legal process and endured as such (Majumder, O'Reilly, Karim, Vostanis 2014).

5.2.3. A comment on improvement

A person is most likely to be able to thrive when they exist within a safe and stable environment and are able to profit from resources that are made available to them (Ryan, Deci 2017), which means that the opposite, summarily put as post-migration living difficulties, can interfere with recovery from pre-existing traumatic experiences and create new ones (Heeren, Wittmann, Ehlert, Schnyder, Maier, Müller 2014; Schick, Morina, Mistridis, Schnyder, Bryant, Nickerson 2018). Unaccompanied refugee youths often require mental health services but struggle to gain access to them and to have their needs met (Ellis, Miller, Baldwin, Abdi 2011), the difficulty compounded by their own reluctance to engage for cultural reasons of stigma and differing frameworks of understanding. Their legal status presents a formidable obstacle too; its security is an integral element for a rights-based approach, and to deny or withhold it equals withholding the rights that follow, such as adequate access to the supporting system and protection against exploitation and abuse, trapping the person in ambiguity and a 'structural lack of security' (Lelliott 2022) and subjecting them to criminalisation, also due to stigma concerning non-legal status (van Kooy, Bowman 2018).

Healthcare professionals also recognise the importance of culture as a factor, reflecting that where cultural specificities may discourage a youth from sharing about their difficulties, the therapist's explicitly stated neutrality and declaration of genuine interest and involvement may help counteract that especially when feelings of shame and guilt are involved, and remarking that the youths have an easier time communicating with someone of same ethnicity or similar background; however, concerns are raised about the separation that this might steer them towards as opposed to inclusion (Majumder,

Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018). Some youths do find talking helpful and cathartic, with the individual characteristics of practitioners, such as good will and a good sense of humour, helping bolster the engagement (Majumder, Vostanis, Karim, O'Reilly 2018); practice shows that if the ideal set of conditions is met where the youth is not prejudiced against mental illness and therapy and is met with understanding from the specialist, trauma focused interventions to seem to be most effective. Also, improvements in post-migration living difficulties tend to predict a more favourable trajectory for treatment (Schick, Morina, Mistridis, Schnyder, Bryant, Nickerson 2018) and, importantly, belonging to a social network is shown to be associated with good mental health (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018), which highlights the importance of community and inclusion.

Cultural competence can be performed at all phases of delivering the mental healthcare service: assessment can include the cultural context of symptoms and their expression, the strategy of acculturation, history of immigration and past stressors or trauma, and cultural strength. Psychotherapy needs to be practical and oriented at solving current issues of integration, immigration trauma, and identity conflicts, as well as helping with symptom management, and potentially involving culturally relevant methods of dealing with mental health issues. Throughout the process, adequate linguistic support is crucial, ideally done directly by specialists to avoid involving a third party (Pumariega, Rothe 2010).

When treating refugee youths who had been exposed to war or other traumas, a phased approach is recommended, which includes establishing trust, trauma-focused treatment, and reintegration, but grief resolution therapy and traditional healers and rituals can also be applied to be more in line with the expectations of refugee youths and their idea of a helping intervention. Group psychosocial interventions have also been used for this purpose (Pumariega, Rothe 2010), reminding of the importance of mutual support networks and perhaps hinting at the beneficial feeling of safety when engaging as a group with something one isn't used to or doesn't know how to approach.

An interesting matter to research would be the ways the youths choose to deal with their emotional problems in terms of coping and resilience rather than focusing the research on the problems themselves (Wernesjö 2012). This could perhaps help gain a better understanding of the interplay of their worldviews and values with problem-solving in the context of a new environment, and by inspecting the methods they reach for to alleviate their emotional suffering maybe we could gain insight into how to adjust the host country specialists' approach to their mental health. Instead of imposing the Western framework and expecting them to switch over to it, perhaps it could prove more beneficial and productive to meet them where they are at and try to synthesise an approach across cultures, either by employing the services of someone culturally closer to the refugee minors and more capable of understanding their needs and how to meet them from a cultural perspective, or building a 'best of both worlds' pathway with some kind of adjustable proportion of different methods – for

example, traditional healing, talking therapy, and medication – that could be made to fit in each individual case.

5.3.   The Matter of Belonging

In our conversations, the topic of school experiences came up a lot, which was to be expected as it was one of the main types of activity the youths partook in. I gathered varied opinions about the school experiences from the youths. Abed had nothing but good things to say, remarking how helpful the teachers were, from assisting in class to offering job opportunities outside of it, which Abed was happy to accept. Bakary, on the other hand, was more reserved about his impressions. He reflected that while he considered his fellow refugee students to be his friends (largely for the reason of coming from the same country and speaking the same language, even though they didn't know each other back home), he did not spend time with them outside of school, citing not having the time as the reason. Instead, Bakary said he would lie in his room and watch Youtube and TikTok.

> *No, me, I just meet them in school. After school, I'm tired. It's late. Going out is not that…*
> *Even if I go to the supermarket, after I come back and like…Youtube, TikTok, and I'm there.*
> *Other people, they are doing something interesting, chatting, I'm watching.*

In contrast to Abed, Bakary often gave me the impression of someone with quite low energy levels, and his words seemed to reflect that. Even if he did technically have time — if he could spend it on a social activity instead of watching videos — then he certainly would be able to, the same way Abed was filling his time with activities, but evidently there were circumstances that made him demotivated to do so, be it the lack of established close bonds with his peers, low social needs, or chronic exhaustion from his lived experiences as refugee youth. When I asked him if he had Portuguese friends, he replied in the negative, as he didn't spend enough time with the locals to have the opportunity to form bonds. Abed, on the other hand, seemed to make little distinction between locals and refugees — when we talked about his social activities and he mentioned, for example, playing football with youths from his area, he only specified that it was a mix of Portuguese and foreign youths when I asked him if that was the case. Otherwise, they were simply a group of peers engaging in a shared recreational task and connected by their interest in it and by inhabiting the same area in the city, which specifically reminded me of the studies done on football as a bonding activity to promote social cohesion (Nakeyar, Esses, Reid 2017; Rosso 2012; Nathan, Bunde-Birouste, Evers, Kemp, MacKenzie, Henley 2010).

When it came to forming bonds with Portuguese people specifically, I gathered results that seem to reflect a need for a closer look, as the responses the youths gave me fell into two categories:

some, like Abed and Lamin, did not appear to place a particular value on these friendships in comparison with friendships with other refugees, considering them equally important; others, like Bakary and Christiane, appeared content enough to have a small circle to no circle at all, thus eliminating the relevance altogether. This could be an interesting and important topic to delve into further next time I get the opportunity, as there is information in research that shows the refugee youths' reluctance to engage with Portuguese peers because they think that it would be crucial to conceal the fact that they are refugees living at a shelter (Moleiro, Roberto 2021).

As they are put into new cultural circumstances, refugee children often struggle with creating and maintaining support networks, feeling safe in the host country, building relationships with peers, and engaging with the educational system. Thus, two key psychosocial needs – developing a sense of well-being and belonging and the ability to adapt to a new environment (Nakeyar, Esses, Reid 2017) – are thrown into jeopardy.

A reported issue appears to be the inability of host country schools to correctly assess the minors' educational experience and place them in a grade that reflects that experience. The cultural diversity of education means that the minors' knowledge and skills cannot always be adequately 'transposed' into a Western school system even if the contextual issues of language barriers or teaching styles are not taken into consideration. Potential outcomes of that can be placing the minor into a class that is too advanced or not advanced enough for their personal level; coupled with possible language issues, this can lead to a greater sense of alienation and subsequent apparent disinterest in school (brought about as the result of devaluing the need for it in order to preserve congruity between a need and a possibility to fulfil that need (Wigfield, Gladstone 2019). In turn, this apparent lack of motivation and engagement leads to teachers assuming that the minors either don't understand the material or don't want to participate in class, and as the result, in the conditions of limited time and resources, teachers often choose to (meaning, see value in and are motivated to) focus on the students they perceive as open to the opportunity of receiving education (Nakeyar, Esses, Reid 2017).

A prominent factor impacting refugee minors in the host country is, of course, discrimination. In an academic setting, discrimination is reported to predict diminished valuing and, more directly, higher non-attendance and lower achievement (Martin, Collie, Malmberg 2024). As refugee minors can already struggle with placing higher value in Western education for reasons of language barriers, inadequate evaluation of their educational experiences, and different priorities (perceiving work and the opportunity to earn money right now as more valuable in comparison to uncertain longer-term gains of school and integration), discrimination can easily act as the 'last straw' and knock down the already unsteady motivation they might have.

Adaptability, in turn, is an important personal resource that denotes the capacity to navigate uncertainty and change (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, Liem 2013), in educational and other settings. Any

area of a refugee minor's life implicates a number of personal demands and resources: factors that can negatively and positively impact their development in any given area. As refugee minors are placed in schools, this becomes relevant to their academic experiences as well, where such barriers to academic development as e.g. fear of failure or difficulty with self-regulation are coupled with adaptability and academic buoyancy (Taha, Anabtawi, Al Wreidat 2024). But aside from these factors, cultural demands and resources become relevant for immigrant and refugee students. Cultural demands constitute ethno-cultural challenges that demand physical or psychological exertion to successfully navigate the difficulties, and cultural resources are ethno-cultural assets that can help students attain their educational goals (Martin, Collie 2022). They are linked with lower and higher motivation respectively but can also additionally mutually influence each other, such as cultural pride buffering the stressful effects of an event of racial discrimination. A prominent set of cultural demands includes racism, discrimination, alienation, and disconnection, while cultural resources include the connection to one's culture, cultural confidence, and the capacity to interact with people outside of one's cultural group (Martin, Collie 2022). Cultural resources act to support a student's self-efficacy at school and can positively influence the value they place in academia, and can counteract the effects of, for example, a disorganised classroom with a teacher whose teaching style is not fitting for the student.

Cultural resources are intrinsically tied with the idea of belonging; belonging 'in a culturally meaningful way' is reported to be a priority (Fozdar, Hartley 2013); whereas social exclusion (in the case of unaccompanied refugee minors, often linked with racism and xenophobia) is a drain of one's emotional resources and a powerful blow to the support scaffolding around them. There are numerous factors forming the development of the sense of belonging, but overall it appears to be an active process rather than a passive one and requires the person to have enough resources to be able to develop and experience belonging, which then have to be channelled into finding safety and security, time, energy, language skills, and figuring out a role in the new place. While it may already be challenging for citizens of the host country, the difficulties are tenfold for immigrants and particularly refugees (Kunchuliya, Eckardt 2024). The need for belonging can drive efforts to engage with the local community, but it doesn't exist in a vacuum, but rather in an interrelation with the reciprocal actions of the host community.

When immigrants or refugees arrive in the host country, they have their own varying attitudes about retaining their culture (so, nurturing their ethnic identity) and/or becoming part of the new society (nurturing their national identity). Then, these attitudes meet the actual and perceived levels of acceptance towards them, plus the official policies concerning them. Factors like language, social interaction, and discrimination are generally considered to be central to intercultural contact and the resulting exchange and mutual influence (Neto 2002). So, ethnic and national identities and their role

in adaptation can be understood within the frame of interactions between characteristics and attitudes of immigrants and members of the host community. According to Phinney et al. (2001), immigrants are more likely to nurture their ethnic or national identity based on the host community's level of multiculturality or pressure to conform. When real or perceived hostility towards immigrants is present, they might either downplay and even reject their ethnic identity or strengthen it via ethnic pride and solidarity as a way to counteract negative attitudes. At the core of it is a sense of shared values and attitudes, and in the new and potentially uncertain environment it can become a powerful and crucial source of support. There is a strong relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem, and if it is strong enough then even the perceived devaluation of the group or the individual may not threaten self-esteem (and consequently, psychological health) so long as this devaluation is not internalised.

Formation of ethnic identity is an important developmental task for adolescents, where they start out with unexamined attitudes of childhood, go through a period of exploration, and emerge, ideally, with a secure achieved ethnic identity at the end (Phinney 1989). Not everyone reaches that last stage by the end of adolescence, as the process can be impacted or interrupted by e.g. forced migration, and it may not be at the forefront of one's attention when they live as part of majority group with little to no contact with people that have different ethnic identities, but is then starkly brought to the foreground as the result of moving (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, Vedder 2001).

Both group and individual phenomena that encompass changes in a range of behaviours, attitudes, and values can be the dynamic and continuous result of two or more cultures coming into contact with each other (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, Vedder 2001). At the functional core of these changes lie the aspects of preservation of one's native culture and the adaptation to the host society, which can happen to different degrees independently of each other (Liebkind 2001). In a society that supports and appreciates multiculturalism from social and legislative standpoints, an ideal outcome, however the details may look in each specific case, at its core is a harmony between how the refugee expects to be treated by the receiving society and how the society treats them – with the logical caveat that this treatment is a positive or neutral rather than detrimental experience. Successful inclusion with a successfully developed identity can be reflected in good health, high self-esteem, and competent performance at work or in school. However, there are other factors that influence the outcomes: aspects of life prior to migration (age, gender, pre-existing cultural distance from receiving society), past and current experiences of hardships and discrimination, immigration policy or demography (Berry 1990). Simply put, the process is anything but clear cut and straightforward, which can become its own source of stress: the more a person interacts with a fundamentally new culture and internalises relevant parts of its makeup, the more stress they undergo, and if their ethnic identity isn't robust enough to support them through this process they might not have the resources to

successfully navigate it. As minors are still undergoing major changes in the areas of socialisation and development, the entire process of inclusion may be affected (Neto 2002).

The study described in Neto's article reports that the majority of adolescent participants described themselves as majority *and* ethnic rather than one or the other, which seems to reflect that Portuguese society supports the integration/inclusion strategy as the preferred one. Higher integration scores in the study reflected a greater penetration into the host society together with a close proximity to the original culture. Unaccompanied minors, however, have a harder time keeping ties with their ethnic identities and might be more susceptible to internalising racism and discrimination which then may result in ethnic self-hate, as a minor's adaptation or lack thereof is highly dependent on family and community factors. Even the cases of extended separation from parents might lead to development of problem behaviours and depressive symptoms among minors (Pumariega, Rothe 2010), and it stands to reason to expect this effect to emerge in situations of unaccompanied minors as well. It has been mentioned before that separation from family members is not always a detrimental factor for unaccompanied minors, but it still leaves them without a cultural facilitator. Moreover, the youths at a shelter can be (and were, in the case of my fieldwork) a heterogenous group – as far as I knew, none of them knew each other before coming to the shelter, so even peer-to-peer support could be vague at best[23].

There have been considerations on what to do to promote inclusion, such as encouraging conditions that favour it in a pluralistic society and reduce the push towards marginalisation among immigrant minors, getting societies and immigrant-related institutions to consider implications for health of a group when making policy-related decisions and employing measures for adaptation of minors that are tailored to the needs of different ethnocultural groups (Neto 2002).

Moreover, the educational setting is crucial. School, according to the Western point of view, is the optimal sociocultural and developmental environment for the opportunity to educate about evolving multi-ethnic societies if it doesn't ignore the minorities in favour of the majority group, and bicultural orientation (Portes, Rumbaut 1990) done at school for classes with majority and immigrant students could be mirrored with public education to encourage change in attitude towards representatives of different cultures (Neto 2002). Overall however, schools as institutions tend to

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[23] Sidenote: a study done by Bernal et al. (1990) shows that Mexican Americans in Southern California area have the highest integration level compared to other groups in the study, as they have a large and established presence there which makes it easier for them to feel as part of both their own culture and the larger society – plus, the readily available label of 'Mexican-American' seems to help by acting as a community label in and of itself, welcoming a new member into an existing framework. Which begs the question: in terms of public policies, would 'implanting' a term meant to hybridise cultures like 'Mexican-American' help like that one did, or hinder by turning into a tool by which to make discrimination easier as now the whole previously more nebulous group would have a defined term?

promote the development of the national identity rather than ethnic (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, Vedder 2001).

The idea of culturally competent services is crucial. As members of our cultures, we by definition cannot fully excise ethnocentrism from our reasoning, but to provide support from a completely unexamined ethnocentric standpoint might do more harm than not to provide any support at all. Cultural competence is the ability to serve across cultural differences that is characterised by valuing diversity, cultural self-assessment, and adaptation of policies, values, and structures to better address cultural needs, and requires awareness and acceptance of differences and cultural values, development of cultural knowledge and the ability to adapt practice to the cultural context of one receiving support (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, Isaacs 1989)

The concept that the sense of belonging positively influences the well-being of refugee youth highlights the importance of building, supporting, and strengthening local social structures, as it is natural for a newcomer to want to connect but struggle with it for a plethora of reasons. When successfully implemented, this helps with strengthening the sense of safety and security, as well as with forming positive connections with the new locale. On the other hand, politically-charged events such as right-wing demonstrations can promote feelings of alienation and insecurity (Kunchuliya, Eckardt 2024).

Overall, finding the sense of belonging is an active and continuous process influenced by both positive and negative experiences and perceptions, and the responsibility in fostering the sense of belonging almost ontologically cannot rest solely on the individual looking to belong as it implies the existence of something to belong *to*; this means that active, culturally competent participation and strive for inclusion has to be done by the receiving side as well, starting with peers and ending with institutions.

5.4. The Portuguese Specificities

In Portugal, when an unaccompanied refugee minor applies for international protection, their case is referred to the Public Prosecutor's Office, which initiates proceedings in the Family and Children's Court. This results in the asylum procedure carried out by SEF and a procedure carried out by the Court where generally, residential care is applied, provided by organisations such as CACR, with later support for independent living. These two procedures are conducted with the information shared between the entities and agents involved, but their decisions do not affect each other, as one has to do with asylum law and the other with the framework of a child's best interests (Roberto, Moleiro 2021).

As mentioned before, the European legislation has very non-specific descriptions of the obligations of the Member States with regards to reception of unaccompanied refugee minors, which

means that every country is left to decide for itself with no clear guidance, which inevitably trickles down to specific cases.

A Portugal-specific issue worth highlighting is that, because of its size and location, the numbers of these asylum application cases are relatively low — since the inauguration of CACR in 2012 and until 2017 it has taken in 195 unaccompanied refugee minors, with 25 youths living there in February 2024. This means that it is difficult to perform a survey of needs and refine the work of the system as there is little incoming data to analyse (Roberto, Moleiro 2021).

To describe the situation in Portugal, it has to be admitted that many of the European issues find their reflection here too. For unaccompanied refugee minors, it starts with a long waiting time in the detainment at the Lisbon airport, through which many refugees come on their way to their destination and where they are intercepted by the border police — officially it should not exceed 48 hours but in practice it can take up to weeks (Moleiro, Roberto 2021) — and continuing with all the challenges that come next. One of the first and main hurdles of their journeys in Portugal is waiting for a decision regarding their asylum protection requests. In the same article it is mentioned that 'the most frequent time for [a request] was more than 12 months', which means that the minors run the risk of simply ageing out of the system and starting anew as refugee adults. Another complication is the accessibility of Portuguese language courses — aside from necessarily isolating the youths from their Portuguese peers (as the latter would have no need for them) and 'outing' them as refugees, the slow learning process means that their initial time at school is spent not being able to follow the class or understand others, which creates a social rift and threatens their already possibly weak motivation to participate (Moleiro, Roberto 2021).

Individuals who work with unaccompanied refugee minors tend to agree on the idea that they represent a vulnerable population, vulnerability here being understood as the result of adversities mostly experienced in their country of origin or on their journey to the host country. This then leads to trauma-focused approach as the key style of intervention when working with them. Vulnerability then extends to and impacts all areas of life of a refugee, for example healthcare and education, leading to heightened risk of insufficient treatment in the case of the former and social isolation in case of the latter, as well as demotivation to learn and inability to focus in class (Roberto, Moleiro, Lemos 2020).

However, focusing on vulnerability is a reductive strategy, as it diminishes the person who is determined to be vulnerable — beyond this, there is still a complex, multifaceted individual with their own wants and needs, and an inexperienced eye (mine, for example, especially at the start of my fieldwork) is liable to see them as willing to accept anything that is offered, while (again, as my fieldwork showed) they are perfectly capable of having higher goals and deserve to be offered quality services. This is perhaps an obvious observation, but I still consider it worth putting into words, as not

being conscious of it runs the risk of becoming so caught up in one's feelings of altruism and helpfulness that we might become unable to discern what is actually required and welcome. Which is why it is absolutely crucial to collaborate with the refugee youths on their life projects and in particular their migratory projects, as it validates their sense of agency but also helps all participants understand and formulate clear goals to work towards.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the non-differentiation in the Portuguese system that requires every unaccompanied refugee child to be treated the same as a Portuguese child at risk. Although on surface level this appears to be a reflection of equality, in reality it means that many components factoring into the contexts of refugee children — such as language proficiency, culture, and many others — remain unconsidered. Government agencies in particular reference the word of the law which states that the intervention must be equal — in the aforementioned article (Roberto, Moleiro, Lemos 2020) a representative even says, *'if they come here and live here, the logic has to be integrative and, let's say functional even, in the sense that they have to adapt to our reality and the rules that exist in our society'*, which shows an extremely ethnocentric view, betraying the strategy as stemming from colonial and postcolonial processes (Santinho 2011) and showcasing the inapplicability of the vague word of the law to actual lived experiences of the refugees. Fortunately, other representatives do stress the importance of reflection and awareness of the cultural specificities even though it may be difficult because of the workload.

Overall, there is a keenly felt need for a national strategy of caring for unaccompanied refugee minors that would have clearly defined competences and responsibilities of the participants. It is important for this strategy to account both for cultural contexts and for the vulnerability of the minors without infantilising them or pathologising their experiences. It cannot be stressed enough that, ideally, a balance should be found in the legislation between being clear enough to be reliably applicable across the fields of law, healthcare, education etc., but also flexible enough to account for and accommodate the nuance of individual situations. Whether it is an idea too oxymoronic to be realistic remains to be seen, but as it stands, the divorce between theory and practice (as, for example, in the matters of refugee status determination cases) continuously fails people, and if the system that is designed to help is not doing that — and even worse, if instead it robs people of hope by putting them in legal limbo or keeping them from exercising their agency — then it is failing do perform its function.

There are ways in which refugee youths can try to counteract the daunting challenges of their new lives in Portugal. They form bonds, mostly with other refugees and based on shared languages, and support each other both emotionally and by sharing information; they find meaningful ways to fill their time of waiting by engaging in team based sports like football or helping out at the shelter; finally, many of them find a source of strength in their faith, from joining the local mosque's community to

observing holidays and rituals together to reading the Quran as a therapeutic action, like the interlocutor T (Santinho 2011).

5.5. 'Grateful for anything'? Informed strategies for inclusion

There are different ways that are proposed for the betterment of the social component of refugees' situation in the host country. Various external factors, as discussed previously, come in the form of exclusion and discriminatory policies directed at immigrants which are also in a mutually influential relationship with the public view (Anderson 2015). This means, however, that there have to be opportunities both to improve the unjust socio-cultural conditions and asymmetrical intergroup relations where it is possible, and to empower refugees to act in spite of them where it isn't.

In the case of unaccompanied refugee minors particularly, it would make sense to avoid prolonging the period of 'legal limbo' so that the state of liminality would not stunt their rightful development and allow them the opportunity to participate more fully in the community. This could include, for example, granting them a residence permit and documentation upon arrival and initial registration as a way to legalise their presence in the host country while it is being determined whether they would be granted international protection, and 'catching' them in the safety net of access to appropriate services such as mental health support and care where necessary (Vervliet, Lammertyn, Broekaert, Derluyn 2013). Having a secure status allows them to participate more fully in everyday life and frees up the energy and cognitive space previously spent on stress and uncertainty – and as people learn and retain best when they aren't in a state of stress, this could vastly improve the quality and pace of their efforts in activities such as learning a new language or making socially supportive contacts, which in turn is shown to decrease the level of PTSD in those who have been diagnosed with it (Hocking, Kennedy, Sundram 2015). Moreover, lower stress levels make therapy more effective as well, which can lead to decreasing the risk of symptoms becoming chronic. Research shows that at least some of post-migration stressors can be relieved if there is freedom of movement and access to services even if asylum procedures themselves cannot be shortened to a meaningful degree (Boettcher, Neuner 2022).

As discussed previously, there is a considerable disconnect between those who try to provide mental health care services, and those that these efforts are aimed towards. Some of the reasoning behind it is rooted in the unequal relationship between refugee minors and specialists for reasons of age, gender, legal status and so on, while the rest has more to do with the cultural aspects. It is necessary for specialists not only to have a greater level of cultural competency to prevent misunderstandings (Dubbin, Chang, Shim 2013), but to be able to meet refugee minors as fellow human beings and engage with them as individuals in a non-stigmatising manner (Mirdal, Ryding,

Essendrop Sondej 2011). Moreover, the presence of a 'common third', which is a shared activity such as engaging in a creative task, walking, or eating, that allows for reciprocity and shapes the environment into something with less stress or pressure is a useful tool not only for the provision of the mental health service itself, but also as a space to temporarily set aside current worries, to contribute to a common activity in a positive and ideally low pressure way, and to channel the telling of one's story through the non-verbal means of art (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018). Furthermore, if done regularly, this 'common third' adds content to one's daily life and potentially provides gentle, non-invasive ways for learning – and so, developing prospects for the future, which in turn also contributes positively to the mental health state. Additionally, engaging in a more complex skill-building activity can grow mastery and improve self-esteem, which in turn helps with anxiety management (Salaberria, Polo-López, Saez, Berry 2015).

By comparison with what is perceived to be formal, stigmatising, or scary when it comes to traditional talking therapy sessions in a clinical context, this community-based approach seems to have a better effect (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018). Moreover, to pull away from the clinical outlook at mental health services, some carers even suggest avoiding the terminology of mental health or mental illnesses and replacing them with more neutral words as a way to avoid triggering the cultural and stigmatising misunderstanding around them (Majumder 2019), and a greater cultural awareness promotes a better understanding of what kind of care is perceived as legitimate by the minors and how best to provide it (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018) .

As refugee minors often perceive traditional Western 'talking therapy' as pointless and even actively harmful, they report on other strategies for coping with past experiences of trauma and loss, namely focusing on collectivity and community, suppressing and distracting, making meaning, and emerging from hopelessness to hope (Wernesjö 2012). In practice, this is achieved by engaging in activities such as playing football, walking, working, or talking with others like 'ordinary' people do. By focusing on the positives, they can feel calmer and happier, which improves their sleep. Thus, they become more motivated to engage in activities that they perceive to lead to quick and tangible results, unlike talking therapy which, in turn, seems to bring no immediate effect and only serves to bring up negative memories and upset them in the moment (Jarlby, Goosen, Derluyn, Vitus, Jervelund 2018).

Of course, it is prudent to point out that mental health help isn't a universal tool to solve every problem a refugee minor faces. While it is important and can provide tangible results (if the necessary conditions are met, such as the specialist's cultural competence and the minor's willingness to try it out), it is unfair to say that the pain and suffering of refugees can be reduced to a matter of mental health (Summerfield 2000), as many post-migration living difficulties are factually out of the scope of control for the minors and cannot be fixed in therapy, such as the legal limbo (Schick, Morina, Mistridis, Schnyder, Bryant, Nickerson 2018). This highlights the need to shift the narrative of service provision

towards well-being rather than illness (Majumder 2019) and target such integration-related post-migration stressors as language, education, and employment (Schick, Morina, Mistridis, Schnyder, Bryant, Nickerson 2018).

Finally, community participation once again should be highlighted as an effective tool in fostering the sense of belonging, improving mental health, and acquiring experiences and skills that can make a meaningful future feel more tangible and attainable. Community participation provides the opportunity to access community resources of value within the group context (Aceros, Duque, Paloma 2021) and can be considered a key element for immigrants' inclusion in host society as it helps build resilience, promotes integration, and offers a way to contribute to society despite social injustice (Sabir, Yull, Jones, Pillemer 2017). Interacting with members of the host community encourages cultural exchange and, when positive, guides towards integration by allowing the refugees to improve their bicultural competences, while interacting with members of one's own culture (for example, as a volunteer in cultural mediation) helps build one's self-esteem by standing up for those who are weaker and raise awareness about their culture in the host society (Martinez-Damia, Marzana, Paloma, Marta 2023). This impulse can be triggered by social suffering as a need to reassert one's ethnic identity (Klandermans, van der Toorn, van Stekelenburg 2008), but it is important to note that too much suffering, combined with the feeling of irrelevance, can suppress it (de Medeiros, Rubinstein, Ermoshkina 2013).

Overall, there are many actions that can be taken to ease the suffering of refugee minors in the host country and to construct an easier path towards inclusion in the host society, starting with streamlining the asylum seeking process, continuing with culturally competent training of professionals involved in any and all services provided to the refugees, easier and culturally aware access to these services, fostering the sense of belonging and the development of the national identity while respecting and nurturing the ethnic identity. All of it, ideally, has to be done with awareness of individual and systemic ethnocentrism, which should be mitigated with education and training and striving to meet the refugee minors halfway and try to hear and respect their points of view.

CHAPTER 6

'You try for a good life': Reflections and Conclusions

But I think, you need to try, yes. You need to try.

— It is very hard.

It is very hard! It is not easy! You don't give up. Never

give up. You need to continue and try for a good life. Yeah.

(Interview with Abed)

Unaccompanied refugee youths face endless challenges both in their home countries, on their journeys, and on their paths of settling in the new places. This is common for all of Europe but also particularly for Portugal. A small and relatively remote country, Portugal does not tend to come to mind of refugees when they imagine a final destination of their journeys. While there are exceptions to this — for example, when they know of Portugal because of famous football players — for many, ending up there happens by accident rather than design, whether their journeys are interrupted in a layover or they assumed they would be able to communicate with the locals because they mistakenly thought that people in Portugal speak French.

Even in cases of the youths deliberately coming to Portugal, their knowledge of the country is often vague and abstract, divorced from the reality they are faced with. Although, realistically, anyone who has never gone (or has never witnessed someone else go) through the complex and complicated process of asking for asylum in a foreign country can hardly imagine the full scope of difficulty this poses. The bureaucratic/legal component alone can be a daunting challenge, on its own standing but also with the compounding circumstances of overworked staff, unclear rules, and unkept deadlines. Not to mention the language barrier, the demand to rapidly adapt to the new way of life in general and the school system in particular, the cultural stress and the risk of isolation, finally the soul-crushing insecurity and precariousness that slowly but surely corrode one's mental health with anxiety and despair. All of it is layered over the painful memories of the past that constantly have to be recalled and offered up for evaluation to strangers in the position of power, the retraumatisation, and the reduction of a person to their status of a helpless, clueless, depoliticised, grateful victim.

But a refugee is not only a handful of traumatic memories locked in an endless fight against the adversities — they are an individual with their own hopes and dreams, uniquely informed by their upbringing and sociocultural context, the shape of their outlook at the world further and continuously refined by the sum of their experiences. Even at a young age, they are fully capable of thinking for themself and envisioning a specific future for themself that is above and beyond basic survival, and while it doesn't negate the fact that they deserve to have help and support like any other minor —

indeed, any other person — it also means that they deserve empathy, understanding, and most of all respect. The effort made by many social workers, lawyers, health professionals, government representatives, activists etc., who strive to uphold refugee youths' rights and to provide for their needs despite the clunkiness and unfriendliness of the system, is admirable and worthy of note — but it cannot be lauded as the best course of action unless it is made in collaboration with the very persons it is purported to be dedicated to. As Westerners, they can be liable to assuming their course of action to be the best one — and it is an understandable assumption, as we form our opinions and make our judgements based on our own unique experiences and interpretations and, as we are all humans living within our own cultural contexts, we cannot ever fully escape our ethnocentric subjectivity, for to do so completely would require rejecting one's entire lived experience. The inability to escape it, however, does not excuse us from making the effort to be aware of this subjectivity and to consciously exercise our ability to look past it and to acknowledge that what we, to the best of our belief, consider to be the best course of action for someone, might not in fact be aligned with their goals, values, and life project — and to try to make the person fit the idea is at best unhelpful and at worst a violation.

My question concerned motivation, what factors form it when it comes to young refugees and the professionals working within the system that receives them, how it in turn shapes a person's decisions and actions, and what can be done to influence these factors. In this context, it seems that the core conflict that impacts motivation is, at the end of the day, a cultural one, when expectations borne of what is habitual to one person do not correspond to reality, leading to disappointment, disinterest, and a desire to invest one's limited energy elsewhere. On the refugees' side, it means being faced with long and unclear waiting times for the documents, the feeling of being tethered to the system as their temporary permits need to be continuously renewed, the admission to classes that only vaguely correspond to their level of education, the pressure to study rather than work and the pressure to conform to the Portuguese idea of what is an acceptable way of life for a minor and what is an acceptable way to be a refugee — any of these factors would be a massive source of stress, but they happen consecutively and contribute to the shock that can easily overwhelm even a perfectly prepared person, let alone someone who is thrown into this after the flight from their country and a difficult journey to Europe. In this state, it becomes easy to lose sight of one's goals and the ability to dream of a future; even, indeed, the ability to hope or to see one's suffering as meaningful, all of which can be very powerful support beams in living through hard times. On the host community representatives' side, on the other hand, this incongruence of expectations and reality can occur in the interactions with the system they work within, be it healthcare, social work, law, or anything else, where the rules are often unclear and the intercultural interaction is unmediated, and people are left feeling abandoned and unsupported and might end up either making life-impacting decisions based on their personal bias or burning out and going with the mechanical flow of bureaucracy. And at the

same time, it can also occur in their interactions with refugees and the image the refugees project which, due to aforementioned reasons of disillusionment and stress, might be interpreted as ungratefulness, laziness, or 'not knowing what is best for them', especially as it is interrelated with the concept of 'refugeeness' and how the idea that a person might have built in their head about a refugee might not correspond to reality. This can happen particularly easily if the host country representative — again, possibly largely due to the incongruence between the refugee's 'performance' and the expectation of that performance they have — may feel lied to or taken advantage of, for example when a refugee says they are a minor but looks older, or when their story sounds 'too rehearsed' for reasons that, in reality, might have nothing at all to do with deception. All of this impacts motivation on both sides, which in turn influences their motivation to engage with each other and the third party of the legislative framework and widens the rift of understanding between them.

At the same time, there are people like Abed. I hesitate to reduce him to an example of a 'model' refugee, as calling him that, in my opinion, devalues all the effort he's put into and continues putting into his life in Portugal; it also implies a sliding scale on which all refugees fall, making some 'better' than others at adjusting to their new life, which doesn't sit well with me. I think that operating in terms of 'being better or worse at life post-flight' is a wrong way to look at it to begin with. Rather, maybe a truer to reality term could be 'met with a support network better or worse suited to their needs', coupled with 'more or less able to resolve the incongruence of expectations and reality with the help of that support network'. Abed's achievements are absolutely worthy of acknowledgement and respect; however, I can't help thinking of the image of him that was described to me when he first arrived at the shelter. He has come a long way since then, but it was not without help: he was given guidance by the CPR staff, took advantage of psychological help, wasn't afraid to come to teachers with his questions, and asked for, received, and accepted any and all work opportunities he could fit into his schedule. In every aspect of his life as a refugee, as far as I can tell from our conversations, he was able both to ask for help and to receive it in a way he felt possible to accept. Despite the plethora of cultural differences between people living in Afghanistan and Portugal, enough bridges were built to create this multicultural in-between space for him and his support network to operate in, and I think it was a crucial factor of his success in Portugal. The congruence means that Abed values the tasks he chooses to do, seeing them as something that affirms his sense of identity and feels relevant to his future plans, and completing them builds up his ability belief and self-confidence, which means he is able to embark on more ambitious projects.

If my view of the motivation issue is at all correct, then Abed's story highlights if not an easy then at least a somewhat straightforward solution to the two-way discrepancy of expectations and reality between refugees and the host community, and perhaps this solution – or a vector towards it, at least – is more obvious to anthropologists than most others: namely, acting from the position of and

with understanding of cultural relativism. 'One size fits all' cannot be a fruitfully applicable strategy when it comes to the multifacetedness of the human experience, and the process of building a multicultural society can only be facilitated with the mutual understanding of cultural contexts and the willingness to be flexible and open to working with them, not to find a middle point or a compromise, but a collaboration, to create something that is more than the sum of its parts.

And before this collaboration can be built it needs the structure to be built upon. Little can be demanded in terms of preparation from the refugee youths: when a person's main motivation is to run 'from' and the situation is urgent and dire, they are unlikely to think about all the implications of running 'to'. The host society, however, from its position of authority and power, does have the luxury of time and resources required to build the scaffolding that is needed to then collaborate with the refugees on their life projects: to inform and educate the staff of legal institutions, to train and support teachers, to adopt an approach that expands the scope of focus beyond the basic needs care, to create practical solutions to obstacles in language learning, education, employment, healthcare, documentation. All of it includes the need for cultural exchange, so that its participants are able to expand their horizons and learn to consider what they see from more than one angle, and it is in this interplay of perceptions and interpretations that a mutual understanding can form – and with it, the deeper understanding of the self and one's own goals. In practical terms, this is where anthropologists can offer more help beyond being country-of-origin experts in the refugee status determination process, but also, crucially, this is where cultural mediators coming from already settled and included refugees could offer invaluable insight based on their lived experiences and knowledge – in a sense, offering a kind of 'apprenticeship learning' of its own for those only just starting out on their paths to inclusion in Portugal.

Steps are already being taken in that direction, even despite the current political climate and all its implications, and they already show results – which means that it is possible, necessary, and entirely within the realm of what can be achieved with mindful effort and care.

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