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## Vocational identity development among unaccompanied refugee minors

Brit Oppedal<sup>a,\*</sup>, Eugene Guribye<sup>b</sup>, Jane Kroger<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Brit Oppedal, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Norway<sup>b</sup> Agder Research, Norway<sup>c</sup> University of Tromsø, The Arctic University of Norway, Western Washington University, USA

## A B S T R A C T

This study examined educational aspirations and vocational identity formation among unaccompanied refugees in Norway. In Phase 1 we employed questionnaire data from 918 unaccompanied refugees to investigate the effects of demographic information, pre-migration trauma, mental health and acculturation-related factors on their educational aspirations. In Phase 2, data from Identity Status Interviews (ISI) with 29 participants was analyzed to obtain information about vocational identity status distribution and to examine core themes and contextual factors underlying their vocational choices. The findings from Phase 1 showed that none of the theoretically and empirically based included variables had a significant effect on their aspirations. Moreover, the overall regression model was non-significant. We discussed these findings in relation to the strong motivation among unaccompanied minors to create better lives for themselves than they could have in the countries they fled from, irrespective of their traumatic experiences and mental health problems. In Phase 2 the most important themes emerging from the ISIs revolved around age, time, and economics. The remedial education to bridge the pre-flight gap in formal education meant that the unaccompanied refugee youth entered upper secondary school at substantially older ages than their classmates. Their older ages then led them to prioritize economic considerations in making vocational choices, since the support from the Child Welfare Services is discontinued when they reach the age of majority. Consequently, most of them chose short vocational paths toward earning a living, rather than complex roads that led to the realization of their own long-term aspirations. This may have limited the social mobility of unaccompanied refugees.

The steady increase in minor refugees and asylum-seekers arriving in Europe, with an historic peak in 2015, is taking place at the same time as these countries are struggling with economic problems and an alarmingly high proportion of, particularly youth, unemployment. Young people are highly affected during periods of economic crisis. Not only are they the first targets for job cuts, but in addition, their transition from school to the job market becomes almost impossible, with associated sentiments of hopelessness for the future and high school drop-out rates (Choudhry, Marelli, & Signorelli, 2012). There is a widespread concern that the so-called Youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) presents a major risk for social exclusion and marginalization, with the prospect of social revolt seen in France in 2005 (Christafis, 2015), or even radicalization (European Commission, 2015). Youth with migrant backgrounds, health problems, and/or lower educational attainments are more likely to become NEETs than other youths from host cultural contexts. Thus, social inclusion and integration of young people with a migrant background, including newly-

\* Corresponding author at: Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Department of Child Development, P.O.Box 4404, Nydalen, N-0403 Oslo, Norway.  
E-mail address: [brit.oppedal@fhi.no](mailto:brit.oppedal@fhi.no) (B. Oppedal).

arrived migrants and refugees, is a key aim of the EU. Education is the main vehicle to reach this goal (European Commission, 2015).

However, research suggests that there is a need to understand the heterogeneity and varied situations and difficulties that these youth face (Yates & Payne, 2006). As such, unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers, i.e. children who migrate without the company of an adult caretaker to apply for asylum in a foreign country, constitute a group of youth with a particularly challenging situation. They are fleeing war, violence, and poverty in their home countries with the associated absence of opportunities for a decent life (Hopkins & Hill, 2008). They are the most vulnerable of all immigrant groups regarding prevalence of mental health problems, and yet they are ambitious with a strong will to adapt and succeed in the countries that grant them asylum (Bean, Derluyn, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Broekaert, & Spinhoven, 2007; Kohli, 2007; Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015). Their complex individual histories have often deprived them of developmentally supportive experiences within the safe haven of the family, the learning environment of the school, or with continuous peer relations, thereby impeding their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Baltes, 1987). Importantly, the frequent break-down of educational institutions in the countries of origin, combined with often long travels to reach the countries of asylum, contribute to a serious lack of formal education among unaccompanied minors. Their re-entry into the educational system after resettlement therefore typically involves catching up with the curriculum of lower grade levels before they enter ordinary education, which for a majority of them implies secondary schooling. At this transition, they face a series of choices with important implications for their futures, such as entering a vocational job-qualifying track, or a theoretical track necessary for later admission into colleges and universities.

The majority of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Europe are between 15 and 18 years old, where forming an identity within sexual, ideological, and vocational domains is one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Marcia, 1980). Many studies have focused on identity development during adolescence (Kroger et al., 2010; Liebkind, 1993; Marcia, 1980; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999; Phinney, 1989); however, when refugees and other immigrant youth are concerned, the focus has mostly been on the domain of ethnic identity formation (Mossakowski, 2003; Phinney, 1989; Tartakovsky, 2009; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Still, making decisions about education and vocation are important aspects of acculturation for refugee youths as they gain insights into the educational institutions and the demands of the labor market in the host country. Furthermore, education is one of society's major tools in social mobility and social integration. Considering the individual and future societal importance of the choices that they make, it is essential to get information about the barriers and resources that are available to them in this process and what support they need to succeed educationally in unfamiliar cultural settings, based on their own stories. Knowledge about how unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers negotiate vocational possibilities in their new contexts as part of the identity formation process could provide such insights. Yet to our knowledge, no studies have investigated these questions.

With this background, the overall aim of the present study is to examine vocational identity developmental processes underlying the educational choices of unaccompanied minors who have received asylum and residence in Norway (Marcia, 1999). In other words, we seek to better understand if and how the extraordinary developmental context of these youths affects normative youth developmental processes. This knowledge can inform theory as well as policy and practices. Since the participants of this study have been granted residence and consequently are no longer asylum-seekers and many have reached the age of majority, we refer to them as *unaccompanied refugees*. We still use the terms *unaccompanied minors* or *unaccompanied minor asylum-seekers* to refer to this population in general.

### Educational aspirations in refugee context

Studies have shown that immigrant and refugee background youths have high educational aspirations (Salikutluk, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007), and females more so than males (Wei-Cheng & Lynette Heim, 2000). Factors associated with the refugee experience, such as pre-migration traumatic experiences and subsequent symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression may, however, reduce aspirations (Nadeem & Ringle, 2016). Many youths, however, view higher education as a route out of poverty and discrimination, and as a proactive response to overcome pre-migration experiences of forced migration and educational disruption (Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Teney, Devleeshouwer, & Hanquinet, 2013). Acculturation related resources such as majority language preference and fluency, as well as a strong orientation towards the majority culture also predict educational aspirations (Flores, Navarro, & Dewitz, 2008; Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006; St-Hilaire, 2002). To our knowledge, this scholarly literature on educational aspirations of immigrant and refugee youth does not include studies that examine predictors of the vocational aspirations of unaccompanied minors. Therefore, as a first phase of the study, we use quantitative data from a population based sample of unaccompanied refugees to examine level of educational aspiration and the extent to which pre-migration trauma, mental health, and acculturation related factors predict educational aspirations. This aim is to examine whether findings from previous studies might be generalized to the unaccompanied refugee context.

The second phase employs data from semi-structured interviews with 29 of the participants to explore deliberations and concerns underlying the identity-defining decisions these youths make about education and work, and the barriers and opportunities they encounter in the process.

The mixed-method approach to obtain information about educational aspirations and vocational identity development may provide different perspectives and triangulation of data about social mobility resources and barriers among undereducated young unaccompanied refugees. The findings may also inform strategic policy planning of intervention to promote economic independence and integration for these youths.

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