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Ambivalent recognition: young unaccompanied refugees' encounters with Norwegian society

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ABSTRACT

Receiving the right to stay in Norway might seem a critical factor for refugees' well-being and belonging. Yet, this research shows that young unaccompanied refugees experience ambivalent feelings towards Norwegian society after their resettlement. The study is based on a qualitative research design with 14 young unaccompanied refugees residing in Norway. Drawing on recognition theory, we focus on how participants' psychosocial well-being is constituted through their encounters with social workers and helpers, restrictive asylum policies, and anti-immigration discourses in Norwegian society. Our findings suggest that, while social workers are central to the well-being of these young people, their interaction is sometimes perceived by the young people as emotional misrecognition. Further, while they have the right to residency, their right to family life is not fully recognised, and this poses a threat to their well-being. Anti-immigration discourses contribute further to feelings of ambivalent recognition. Participants strived to manage through active involvement in relationships, everyday coping, sensemaking, critical reflection and social engagement, insisting on their own and other refugees' worth. We argue that youth-focused social services must explicitly engage with these young people's broader legal, emotional and social (mis)recognition and with their ways of managing challenges when assisting them in achieving well-being.

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Young unaccompanied refugees; recognition; asylum policies; social work; psychosocial well-being; relationships

Introduction

In our first encounter with Abrihet, a friendly 19-year-old, at a municipal centre for unaccompanied minors, we asked about what contributed to her well-being. She replied that, despite all the support from social workers and her foster family, what she really needed was being reunited with her family in Norway. Family reunification policies in Norway made this dream impossible to fulfil. Her answer casts light on how the everyday life and psychosocial well-being of young unaccompanied refugees are not only intimately

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tied to events and relationships in distant places (Eastmond 2000) but are also linked to ambivalent and often contradictory policies and practices in their recipient countries (Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020; Tørrisplass 2020).

Refugees are expected to integrate into the Norwegian labour market and society through the assistance of the welfare state (Brochmann 2017). The present study explores the discrepancy between what young unaccompanied refugees consider important for their psychosocial well-being and what the Norwegian welfare state offers them in their path towards integration. Drawing on participant observation, interviews and workshops, we ask, what role do social workers and social surroundings play in young unaccompanied refugees' psychosocial well-being, and how are these young people subject to and strive to manage issues impeding their well-being?

Considerable research on unaccompanied minor and young asylum seekers and refugees has found that they are at increased risk of psychosocial problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (El Baba and Colucci 2018; Hodes 2019; Svendsen et al. 2018), while coping strategies, active responses, subversiveness and resilience are also evident (see, e.g. Keles et al. 2018; Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020; Svendsen et al. 2018; Valenta and Garvik 2019; Vandevordt 2017). These young people face particular challenges in the resettlement process in the new country (Keles et al. 2018), yet few studies have investigated the psychosocial well-being of young refugees in the period between the introductory stage and until they are considered 'integrated'.

Further, Brough et al. (2013) argue that powerful sociopolitical forces in refugees' experiences tend to be transformed into 'a medicalized micro context of inner individual worlds' (207). This study answers to the call for heightened *political* sensitivity in both trauma and resilience studies by examining three aspects which our participants emphasised, and their interconnection to psychosocial well-being, namely encounters with social workers, asylum policies and anti-immigration discourses.

The point of departure for our analysis is Warming's (2015) reworking of Honneth's (1995) recognition theory, which we use to better capture how (a lack of) psychosocial well-being is constituted for these youth. Kauhanen and Kaukko's (2020) literature review suggest the need for more research on 'how recognition is displayed in the range of institutional, social and cultural structures in which unaccompanied children live' (875). Furthermore, they call for research on how mis/recognition is experienced by the children and young people. We contribute to this research gap by de-individualizing ideas about wellbeing and by demonstrating the ways in which transnational interconnectedness of young people with their family, friends and community shape young unaccompanied refugees' psychosocial wellbeing. Further, drawing on Haldemann (2008), we stress that young refugees' past experiences of violence, injustice and misrecognition and current experiences of social misrecognition can reinforce each other. We argue that the reception and treatment of young unaccompanied refugees in Norwegian society is characterised by an ambivalent recognition, with negative implications for their psychosocial well-being.

Background: young unaccompanied refugees in Norway

We employ the expression «young unaccompanied refugees» to refer to the participants in this study. The participants had all arrived in Norway as unaccompanied minors, which

implies that they were under 18 years and without the company of parents or others with parental responsibility on arrival. During the research process, they were between 15 and 20 years. That is, some were still unaccompanied minors while others were former unaccompanied minors. Hence, we prefer to use the expression young unaccompanied refugees, highlighting that they were young people in transition between childhood and adulthood.

About 42% of all forcibly displaced people in the world are under 18 years old (UNHCR 2021). The majority of unaccompanied minors who have come to Norway are from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Syria, with 84% being boys (Kirkeberg and Lunde 2020). While many children and young people of refugee background have experienced adversity and potentially traumatising events, they also exercise agency in interpreting their circumstances and in responding strategically (Watters 2008), sometimes resisting (Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020) or subverting power relations in hostile environments (Vandevoordt 2017).

In Norway, unaccompanied minors who are granted residency are entitled to welfare rights and services, such as housing and care services, support measures, social benefits and education (Svendsen et al. 2018). Social workers are crucial in the provision of many of these services. While the welfare state, represented by social workers and other helpers, offers an 'extended parenthood' to unaccompanied minors, the care and support is conditional and generally not characterised by mutuality (Paulsen, Riise, and Berg 2020).

Research has shown links between a lack of psychosocial well-being and experiences with life-threatening, stressful and potentially traumatic events before and during the migration journey, such as witnessing war or armed conflict (El Baba and Colucci 2018). What has gained less attention is that in the post-migration phase, discrimination, harsh policies and negative attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees and a lack of social support are further associated with an elevated risk of psychosocial problems (El Baba and Colucci 2018; Hodes 2019). More welcoming and supportive reception policies could prevent significant levels of psychological distress (Hodes 2019). It can also be prevented by increased knowledge of the various aspects leading to or hindering well-being for young unaccompanied refugees in the period of their lives in focus here – when they have been acknowledged as refugees but are not yet considered 'integrated'. This study will shine light on factors shaping current and former unaccompanied minors' psychosocial wellbeing in that period.

The political climate related to asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants has become harsher in Norway, as in other parts of Europe (Svendsen et al. 2018). This can be associated with political rhetoric depicting immigration as a problem and a burden on the welfare system (Fangen and Vaage 2018; Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020). Since the sharp rise in arrivals of asylum seekers to Europe in 2015, Norway has been characterised by increasingly restrictive asylum policies, with substantial consequences for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (Lidén, Stang, and Eide 2017; Svendsen et al. 2018; Valenta and Garvik 2019). Several amendments to the Norwegian Immigration Act in 2015 and 2016 led to an increase in limited residence permits for unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, who were expected to return when they turned 18 (Garvik and Valenta 2021; Lidén, Stang, and Eide 2017). Moreover, Norwegian immigration authorities have intensified their practice of revoking residence permits or citizenship (Brekke et al. 2019). Similar trends of increasingly restrictive policies aimed at reducing the arrival

of unaccompanied minors exist in other European countries (Derluyn 2018). There is a conflict between children's rights on the one hand and immigration control, restrictions and suspicion on the other, resulting in ambivalent policies (Tørrisplass 2020) with real consequences for the young people's lives and well-being. Limited research has addressed how young unaccompanied refugees make sense of and navigate these complex social landscapes (Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020).

Conceptualising recognition

Previous research has highlighted the relevance of recognition in understanding the interconnections between unaccompanied minor and young asylum seekers and refugees and their new environments (Eide 2007; Kauhanen and Kaukko 2020; Paulsen, Riise, and Berg 2020; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018). Taylor (1994) described due recognition as a vital human need. Honneth (1995) conceptualised three stages of recognition: love, rights and solidarity. Love refers to close relationships characterised by strong emotional attachment and loving care, and includes friendships, relationships between children and parents and erotic relationships. It can be extended to relationships between publicly employed caregivers and young people (Paulsen, Riise, and Berg 2020). Rights are related to acknowledging each person as a free and equal human being and a bearer of equal rights. Solidarity is associated with the social recognition of people's life-history, abilities and potential contributions to society. Warming (2015), reworking Honneth's (1995) theory in relation to social work practice, framed the three stages of recognition as (1) emotional recognition, (2) legal recognition and (3) social recognition, which we find useful. Misrecognition is understood as physical maltreatment, denial of rights and symbolic devaluation (Honneth 1995). In Warming's (2015) understanding, emotional misrecognition can also take the form of 'care without love' (251), which she saw as a potential threat to young people's well-being. The denial of recognition can lead to psychological injury (Honneth 1995) and can exacerbate trauma (Haldemann 2008). Moreover, feelings of being disrespected can become the starting point for social struggles and conflicts (Honneth 1995). Recognition underpins wellbeing through enabling marginalised groups' or individuals' struggle for justice, and is thus a source of agency (Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020).

Researchers have used recognition theory (Fraser 2000; Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994), for example, to study practices of care (Warming 2015). Recognition is also connected to the development of a sense of belonging, which is fundamental to social integration (Eide 2007; Paulsen, Riise, and Berg 2020). Moreover, scholars have highlighted the need for social recognition of the pain and injustice experienced by refugees and survivors of collective violence (Haldemann 2008; Varvin 2017). Recognition theory has rarely been applied in research with unaccompanied children and youth, with some exceptions (Eide 2007; Kauhanen and Kaukko 2020; Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020; Paulsen, Riise, and Berg 2020; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018). Paulsen, Riise, and Berg (2020) found that unaccompanied minors in Norway expressed a need for more emotional support. Minors' legal recognition was challenged by systems that did not recognise them as individuals with unique needs, by their sudden transition to adulthood and limited knowledge of their rights and possibilities. Kauhanen and Kaukko (2020) argued that unaccompanied refugee children and young people struggle for recognition of their

right to exist and stay in their present host countries and that the fear linked to a lack of legal rights 'is a form of misrecognition' (6–7). Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh (2018) noted that, while unaccompanied refugee minors largely lack legal recognition from the state, foster carers help young people achieve legal recognition by advocating for their rights. Korkiamäki and Gilligan (2020) identified four ways in which unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors respond to misrecognition: resigning, resisting, conforming, and claiming ordinariness. Yet, there is still a need for more research on understanding how (mis)recognition of unaccompanied children and youth is displayed in different contexts (Kauhanen and Kaukko 2020), and of their responses (Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020). Young unaccompanied refugees are not passive victims, and though their possibilities of agency might be 'constrained' or 'ambiguous' (Payne 2012), they also have a 'sense of agency' (Johnson and Gilligan 2021), striving to manage misrecognition and hostile environments.

This article outlines what our data showed as three important aspects in the participants' experience of (mis)recognition, namely (1) misrecognition in encounters with social workers and helpers; (2) restrictive asylum policies; and (3) anti-immigration discourses. We suggest that these three spheres constitute ambiguous and complex social landscapes of rejection and acceptance, mistrust and belonging, and recognition and misrecognition that the young unaccompanied refugees navigate in their search for well-being.

Methodology

The data for this article derives from a wider study of the psychosocial well-being, resilience and participation of young, unaccompanied refugees (Johansen 2022; Johansen and Studsrød 2019). The research project used a qualitative research design, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and workshops inspired by participatory approaches (Bladt 2012; O'Kane 2008). Connections between the young people's psychosocial wellbeing, interpersonal relationships, and broader socio-political phenomenon was addressed, in light of a psychosocial perspective.

The research participants were young unaccompanied refugees between 15 and 20 years who had arrived in Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and had been granted residency. Fourteen participants from Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Syria and Ethiopia participated in the research, of which most were male. They were of various religious beliefs and their time of residency in Norway was 1–5 years. Regarding participants' families, two mothers had achieved family reunification with their children after several years of separation. The father and/or mother of several participants were dead or missing, while other families maintained contact but were not entitled to family reunification.

Johansen recruited participants at a municipal centre for unaccompanied minor refugees after meetings with management and staff, and information meetings with potential participants. She engaged in participant observation at the centre several evenings per week for three months, gaining insight into their everyday lives. Afterward, she conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 of these participants, including follow-up interviews with three of these. Moreover, she conducted various workshops inspired by participatory research (O'Kane 2008) and critical utopian action research (Bladt 2012).

During participant observation, Johansen observed interactions with social workers and heard participants address concerns regarding family reunification and deportation of friends. During interviews, she asked about what contributed to participants' wellbeing and what represented challenges, and issues of encounters with social workers and the asylum system were brought up, among others. The workshops further explored what participants experienced as challenges in young refugees' lives and their dreams for the future. Participants expressed their views on different issues, among them current asylum policies and anti-immigration discourses.

All data have been de-identified, informed consent has been obtained, and the process has followed ethical procedures in line with the requirements of The Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK) (approval number 2016/791/REK vest). Ethical concerns were a central issue throughout the research process to protect participants while preserving their self-determination.

The data analysis has been an abductive process, inspired by 'qualitative content analysis' (Graneheim and Lundman 2004) and 'connecting strategies' in qualitative data analysis (Maxwell 2008). Johansen coded the data material using NVivo, looking for patterns and potential themes related to participants' experiences of Norwegian society. She developed a matrix consisting of initial codes and themes (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). She found an overlap between several cells of the matrix, as participants often linked different aspects of their lives closely together. Hence, connecting strategies for data analysis, which attempt to understand the data in context (Maxwell 2008), were found useful. The findings were subsequently revised in light of recognition theory. This implied omitting some initial themes and including others.

The three aspects we discuss were brought up by participants as important factors shaping their lives. One limitation of our study is that it explored 'challenges' and thus encouraged critical reflection on Norwegian society in the workshops. It is possible that another approach might have led to richer data on experienced recognition. Moreover, this study involved a limited number of youths during a short period of time. A longitudinal study could have better investigated how their well-being developed over time. Additionally, the study has not addressed what role educational or work ambition play in their wellbeing.

Findings: understanding (mis)recognition in young unaccompanied refugees' lives

Emotional (mis)recognition: encounters with social workers and helpers

Face-to-face encounters with social workers and other helpers (foster families, legal guardians, teachers, general practitioners) employed to provide welfare services related to care and support, housing, social benefits, education and health were central to these young unaccompanied refugees' experiences of Norwegian society. Social workers are representatives of the welfare state who balance ambivalent policies emphasising children's rights, on the one hand, and immigration restrictions and market-oriented management principles, on the other (Tørrisplass 2020). Participants described helpers who they experienced as supporting them in their everyday struggles to learn Norwegian, succeed at school and integrate into Norwegian society. Contributions addressed by

the young people were practical support, help with homework, guidance about Norwegian society, emotional support and organised activities contributing to 'a better life'. Jawad explained,

Here [at the municipal centre for unaccompanied minors], [...] I get help with school and other activities that can help me have a better life. Additionally, it is nice to talk to those who work here, learn to know them and get more information about how one can live in this society.

Nimoona recalled his lack of wellbeing, expressed in loneliness, sleep deprivation and sadness, when living in a reception centre. His situation improved with the support from a social worker from a similar background to Nimoona, who, according to Nimoona, spoke to him using humour and encouragement. 'When you talk to someone, you forget the difficult things. [Or] it doesn't pressure you as before', Niimoona noted.

Tesfaye also highlighted the important role he perceived that one social worker played in his life:

Nina helps me. She is very good. [...] If one is going to help, one must help from the heart, not because it's a job. That's why I like [her]. She calls me even when she's not at work. [She] sends me text messages. If I call, she answers. [...] If I have a bad day and call, if no one answers then, there might be a problem

Participants valued social workers' attentiveness and availability on 'bad days'. Both Niimoona and Tesfaye mentioned social workers who they experienced as helping them outside working hours, indicating a willingness to go beyond their professional role. Tesfaye's metaphor 'help from the heart' suggests that the quality of social workers' assistance for the youth is tied to concepts like empathy, compassion and love.

Simultaneously, participants spoke of experiences with social workers and other helpers who they believed did not understand their psychosocial needs, experiences and priorities, and viewed the relationships as characterised by limited trust, lack of time and understanding, and lack of interest in the youth's needs. For example, Abrihet described her first period in Norway as characterised by loneliness, stress and difficulties expressing herself, and argued that she missed encountering social workers showing interest in her situation, needs and emotional state, explaining: '[W]hen I was at the reception centre, nobody asked me how I felt, what I stressed about or if I wanted something, or if I wanted to talk to someone'.

Even after Abrihet settled in a Norwegian municipality and lived with a foster family, she felt that her emotional needs were only partially met. While she described the family as kind and helpful, she did not fully trust them because she believed that 'they cannot care about me as my real family do'. To her, the foster family did not provide the emotional bonds characterising her relationship with her biological family.

Samiira, whose closest family members were all dead, described the experience of not being seen, cared for or helped by Child Welfare Services (CWS) when she came to Norway. For several years, she lived with a relative who, she argued, was not taking good care of her: 'For five years, when I woke up, I was sad, and when I went to bed, I was sad. I didn't get any help'. On several occasions, she was in touch with CWS but kept silent about her suffering because it was difficult to speak about. She described social workers who visited her at home but would only stay for what she remembered

as 10 min. Beyond initial courtesy phrases, she perceived them as neither having time nor building the necessary trust for her to express her thoughts and feelings. She was angry with CWS for neglecting her. After several years, she was finally able to describe her experience of the situation. This resulted in improved support.

Participants described encounters with professionals whose understanding of their situation and background was perceived as limited, as exemplified by Tesfaye. He fled his homeland at the age of 12, after his parents had died, and spent the following three years alone in Northern Africa, where he suffered from violence, insults and humiliation and witnessed terrible abuses in captivity. These experiences still affected his well-being five years after his arrival in Norway:

The biggest problem is that I don't sleep at night. I'm sweating all over my body, and I'm dreaming that I'm in Libya. Sometimes, I think I'm there. Then, I wake up [he demonstrates waking up suddenly and looking around]: 'Am I in Norway?'

Insomnia and nightmares led to lack of concentration and absenteeism, and eventually he left school without his teachers inquiring about the reasons: 'At school, they only think of rules [for absence], but sometimes, that doesn't work. One has to ask about what's going on'. Normally, he would never get angry, he added, but they 'talk so much and don't understand me'.

Participants' experiences with social workers and other helpers were multifaceted. In some cases, they experienced receiving guidance, help and emotional support. In other cases, they felt misunderstood, neglected and not adequately cared for. Nevertheless, participants did not merely accept these situations of misrecognition, but continued to actively seek support from social workers and others that could contribute positively to their wellbeing. Moreover, as addressed in a previous article (Johansen and Studsrød 2019), they engaged in reciprocal relationships of companionship and mutual support and helped others through small acts of kindness and social commitment.

Legal (mis)recognition: encounters with asylum policies and the impact on interpersonal relationships

Participants expressed feelings of gratitude regarding their own rights and opportunities to build a better future in Norway. For example, Nimoona described the moment he was granted residence permit as one of happiness, and he associated his legal stay and the housing he was provided with feelings of justice and acceptance. The importance of residency and shelter was also highlighted by Mirza, who associated it with stability, safety and belonging. Afrax spoke about the importance of accessing education, noting that it was key to realising his opportunities and managing well in society.

However, participants also expressed ambivalence about their life in Norway. While some had achieved family reunification with their mothers and described their importance in their lives, others were not entitled to family reunification, which had a negative impact on their well-being. According to the Norwegian Immigration Act, unaccompanied minors are entitled to family reunification if they are under 18 years old and are granted residency under Section 28 (asylum), but not under Section 38 (residence permit on humanitarian grounds).

Jawad, a 17-year-old boy who had fled from his homeland, had initially settled as an undocumented immigrant in a neighbouring country with his family but continued to Norway alone at the age of 15. In Norway, he lived with relatives. When asked about aspects of his life that contributed to his well-being, he took a deep breath, stared into space and reflected for a moment before answering:

I have a residence permit, I go to school [...], I get help and I'm grateful for this, that I have these opportunities. But the truth is that, in this situation ... I'm only surviving. [...] for me, life is defined as a family. Now I live alone [that is, without his parents], and I must think of [...] what can happen to my family. So, this is not the life I want.

Jawad's emphasis on being grateful could be understood as a way of constructing himself as a legitimate and rightfully deserving refugee confronted with a culture of disbelief in which claims for protection are discredited and questioned. However, his answer was swiftly directed towards the pain and uncertainty related to his family, who were not entitled to family reunification. His ability to enjoy the opportunities in Norway was overshadowed by the awareness that his family lacked access to safety, health care and food – that is, fundamental rights – since they lived as undocumented refugees in a conflict-ridden region. Jawad explained, 'I compare other families with my family, and I see that my family are [...] human beings just as others. [...] They deserve a better life than the one they have. But I see that they have nothing'.

When discussing the violence in the region where his family lived, he said, 'Sometimes I dream; I get crazy. I have seen many human beings who died together'. In Jawad's narrative, his well-being is tied to that of his family, and his concern for them makes his life in Norway unsettled, despite his legal status.

Similar reflections were expressed by other youths. When asked about what was most significant in his life, Aram answered, 'First, it's my health, and second, it's my family'. He described living in a 'warm family environment' as fundamental to his own health. However, like Jawad's, Aram's family did not qualify for family reunification, despite living in a war-ridden country, because Aram had turned 18 years old. While communicating with his family was crucial in his life, it happened infrequently due to bad internet connection. Aram followed the news from his homeland, often without knowing how his family was doing. This situation, he argued, affected his health and led to 'noise or chaos in my head', an expression which suggests his emotional distress faced with his family's living conditions.

The young refugees also expressed concerns about the situation of friends and other people in their communities with limited residence permits, rejected asylum applications or revoked residence permits. The situation of one of Jawad's friends was particularly upsetting to him. Three days after this 18-year-old was deported, a car bomb exploded near his hotel. Jawad showed us a Norwegian newspaper featuring a picture of his friend in a room filled with broken glass. The ongoing violence, while far away, impacted Jawad and seemed to remind him of his own experiences.

Afrax was worried about a 19-year-old friend who came to Norway as an unaccompanied minor at the same time as himself and was currently seeking asylum elsewhere, as his residence permit had been revoked. 'He says it is very difficult to walk around [undocumented] in Europe', Afrax noted. In one of our workshops, Afrax expressed a wish to

write a protest letter about his friend's situation, demonstrating one way participants strived to manage and resist experiences of unfair treatment.

Mirza expressed concern for friends and other young people, noting that their suffering was painful to think about and made him lose his concentration. Reflecting on the need for a permanent place to live, he noted,

You have to be sure that you are going to stay somewhere. It can be a house; it can be a country. [...] Most of us who live here [...] are still a bit insecure ... [...] When one does not have a permanent place where one knows a hundred percent that one will stay, it becomes difficult. [...] Anyhow, that feeling [of insecurity] always comes, in one way or another, to the brain and the heart.

Mirza's reference to insecurity seemed to imply not only a legal but also a psychosocial need for certainty, stability and belonging. While gaining residency was vital in participants' lives, their continued feeling of insecurity appeared to relate to doubts of being able to obtain a permanent stay in Norway and eventually a Norwegian citizenship. Moreover, interpersonal relationships were affected by increasingly restrictive asylum policies. The same state that offered them residency simultaneously restricted reunification with family members and rejected asylum applications of friends and others in their community, granting limited residence permits, revoking residence permits and deporting people to their homelands. Disregarding emotional and social ties, the state considers refugees over 18 years to be independent individuals and no longer legally tied to their families. Yet, kinship and family ties often are a substantial part of decisions to migrate and of how refugees cope afterwards (Bendixsen and Näre 2022).

Participants described several ways in which they strived to manage this complex set of issues, many of which seemed to contribute to their psychosocial wellbeing. One response involved what we describe as everyday coping: focusing on securing their future through studies and work and keeping a positive attitude. 'I try to do something that is good, like homework or having fun with friends', noted Sabriye, while Afrax said, 'I just focus on participating in all the opportunities that I have'. Some youths showed resilience and agency through efforts to support their families. Sensemaking was another active response, which implied making efforts to understand Norwegian asylum policies. In some cases, this implied justifying or normalising these policies. For instance, Sabriye commented,

So many people are coming, right? Then it becomes difficult for the country as well. And the other refugees, they need help, but Norway has the right to say, 'No, we have too many [refugees]'. It's difficult to solve. But I think it's bad that they don't get help.

Yet another way of managing, indicating resistance, was to question and challenge current asylum policies through counterarguments based on their own and other people's experiences. Regarding friends whose asylum applications had been rejected in Norway, but who were subsequently granted asylum in France and Germany, Mirza asked, 'If they had a right [to protection] in other countries, why not in Norway?' The question implied a critical reflection, seeing the processing of their asylum applications as unfair or arbitrary. Likewise, Jawad reflected critically on his parents' situation, viewing it as inhuman and unjust.

Hence, Norwegian asylum policies seemed to contribute to ambivalent feelings of gratitude on the one hand and sadness, pain and uncertainty on the other, while also leading to several counterresponses.

Social (mis)recognition: encounters with anti-immigration discourses

We also found that anti-immigration discourses in social media and public debate seemed to affect participants' psychosocial well-being. Participants had detected statements like 'Refugees don't work' or 'They're only coming because of the money' in the media and from politicians and other Norwegians. Some described a perceived suspicion towards their motivations and protection needs. They also mentioned discourses about the need for immigration control, reflected in statements like 'It's difficult for Norway to receive all refugees', and depictions of immigration as a potential burden to the Norwegian welfare state. For example, Abrihet spoke about a TV programme portraying Somali refugees as social system freeloaders taking advantage of the Norwegian welfare state. She described how one of her Somali friends 'cried for a whole week and couldn't go to work' after watching this programme, which also made Abrihet sad.

Jawad talked about an encounter with a group of Norwegians who seemed to consider him and other refugees as primarily economically motivated migrants:

I try my best not to get sad. [...] I've tried several times to make [...] Norwegian friends. [...] I've discovered that they look not only at me but at other refugees in a particular way: "They're only coming because of the money." [...] When I was new in Norway, some friends and I were invited to a party, and there were some other Norwegian people [...] I understood that some of them didn't like me, or they were only trying to express their own views: "We know why you've come here." I must add that, of course, not all Norwegian society is like that.

Jawad's effort to make Norwegian friends to cope with his sadness ended after such suspicion-filled encounters. Norwegian society can thus be a source of unbelonging, as stereotypical and stigmatising discourses on migrants and refugees may create experiences of othering and marginalisation. Jawad's reference to anti-immigration discourses that present refugees as merely motivated by welfare benefits is part of an ongoing public debate in several European countries about undeserving versus deserving welfare recipients (Dahlgren 2016; Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020).

Abrihet described a lack of knowledge among Norwegians of the life-threatening situations she had faced as an unaccompanied minor. She exemplified this with her classmates, whom she described as 'knowing nothing' and as only interested in parties, clothes and good-looking boys and girls. When fleeing through the desert in Northern Africa, she almost died of thirst and hunger and witnessed the death of a fellow refugee minor. Moreover, she had female friends who had been raped. These realities, which returned to her in flashbacks, were invisible to her Norwegian peers. Abrihet's experience of her classmates as both immature and unaware of her past adversity seemed to contribute to a feeling of alienation.

Mirza had the impression that many Norwegians were worried about the consequences of immigration and illustrated this with statements like 'Refugees cost the society a million each year', 'Refugees don't work', 'Refugees take our jobs' and 'take

our culture'. In these statements, refugees are seen as causing problems to the welfare state and as a threat to Norwegian culture, implying a mistrust of their (potential) contributions to Norwegian society.

Participants responded to anti-immigration discourses in different ways. For instance, Mirza considered it 'totally normal' that some people had negative attitudes towards refugees and explained it with a lack of understanding: 'When I read the comments sections, [...] I understand immediately that most people misunderstand or lack an understanding of what a refugee is'. This response can be seen as sensemaking. Participants also challenged and critically reflected on these discourses. Jawad rejected discourses portraying refugees as economically motivated, arguing that 'unbearable problems' in his homeland forced him to leave. Mirza argued that journalists should put more emphasis on positive aspects of refugees. Likewise, Sabriye argued that 'many [young refugees] are smart and want a good future', implying that their resources and positive attitudes should be recognised. Hence, participants argued that refugees' well-justified reasons for fleeing should be recognised and that they should be valued as resourceful people trying to contribute to society.

Mirza wanted to contribute to a better understanding of refugees. Consequently, he engaged in different activities, such as speaking to journalists about unaccompanied minors and participating in storytelling events organised by a solidarity organisation, arguing:

Everyone has a responsibility [...] towards society. Therefore, I said, "I must [...] send a message." My story isn't only my story. It's the story of most people, those who were never heard or who drowned in the ocean. [...] I thought, "I will speak on behalf of everyone."

Telling his story publicly was motivated by the wish to make a difference for other refugees. While it was painful in the beginning, channelling his pain into a social struggle for the recognition of young refugees seemed to give him a sense of meaning. Moreover, resisting negative stereotypes and working actively for recognition contributed positively to his own wellbeing (Johansen and Studsrød 2019).

Hence, participants' everyday lives evolved amid a public debate where anti-immigration discourses were commonplace, contributing to a lack of wellbeing and feelings of misrecognition. Yet, participants found ways to make sense of and contest stereotypes of refugees and, in some cases, acted to transform the negative political discourses and media images.

Discussion: ambivalent recognition

While having been granted permission to stay and, thus, a secure basis of well-being from which to create a future in Norway, the young people in this study expressed ambivalent feelings regarding Norwegian society and their prospects of a future there. Their interactions with Norwegian society were characterised by ambiguous messages of acceptance and rejection, loving care and emotional distance, opportunities and disbelief, recognition and misrecognition (see also Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020; Tørrisplass 2020). We argue that the young peoples' feelings of ambivalence can be understood in light of emotional, legal and social (mis)recognition, which we will elaborate in the following.

Participants described social workers and other helpers who offered emotional support and loving care. They valued helpers with the capacity to engage with their thoughts and feelings, listen to their pain, build trust, show understanding and 'help from the heart', that is, from a place of loving care and compassion that transcends professional support (see also Eide 2007; Kauhanen and Kaukko 2020; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018). This resonates with the concept of *emotional recognition* (Warming 2015). Yet, participants also described relationships marked by a lack of trust, interest, loving care and understanding of their past experiences and current needs. Participants seemed to miss the involvement, unconditionality and reciprocity associated with intimate relationships (see also Kauhanen and Kaukko 2020; Paulsen, Riise, and Berg 2020). A perceived lack of understanding was, in some cases, related to social workers who they experienced as not showing interest in their needs and emotional state or as unable to understand their current challenges in Norway in relation to past experiences with violence, injustice and potentially traumatic events. This experienced lack of emotional recognition appeared to affect participants' psychosocial well-being. As noted by Kauhanen and Kaukko (2020), the need to be recognised with love is essential to every person's well-being.

At a legal level, participants in this study had the right to residency and subsequent public services in Norway. This can be understood as legal recognition (Warming 2015). Participants expressed gratitude for those rights, associating them with safety, acceptance and opportunities for a good life. Simultaneously, their relational rights, among them to family life, were not fully recognised, partly due to increasing legal restrictions on family reunification. The right to family life, as set out in international and regional law, applies to all, including refugees (Nicholson 2018). However, despite the devastating consequences of family separation on refugees' well-being, it has become difficult to realise this fundamental right in many countries. Moreover, our analysis showed that the situation of friends and other people they cared for, who suffered in part because of current asylum policies, affected participants' psychosocial well-being negatively.

At a societal level, participants described political discourses depicting refugees with mistrust and ignoring their resources and value to society. Through the media, new acquaintances and the asylum system, participants encountered mistrust (Knudsen 1995) and anti-immigration discourses depicting immigration as a problem and a potential burden to the welfare state (Fangen and Vaage 2018). This can be understood through the concept of *social (mis)recognition*. Social recognition (Warming 2015), or what Honneth (1995) called solidarity, refers to how people's life histories, capacities and potential contributions to society are recognised socially. In contrast, a lack of social recognition refers to downgrading, denigration, and insult (Honneth 1995).

Another dimension of social (mis)recognition was also touched upon by participants: their memories of life-threatening situations, bomb attacks, rape and death of fellow refugees continued to affect their psychosocial well-being but remained invisible and seldom socially recognised. When society fails to recognise survivors' experiences with collective violence, this can exacerbate trauma, particularly when the pain is coupled with disbelief, partial acknowledgement, denial or invisibility of experienced harm and injustices in society (Haldemann 2008). Without recognition of traumatic events, reparation and integration might be undermined (Varvin 2017).

Despite participants' experiences with misrecognition, they strived to manage and showed agency through a variety of responses, at different times and sometimes simultaneously: First, they actively engaged in relationships with social workers, family and friends, seeking support and helping others. Second, by focusing on studies and work and keeping a positive attitude, they engaged in everyday coping. This resonates with what Korkiamäki and Gilligan (2020) describe as 'conforming', which 'can serve as an agentic and often productive response for the young people when facing threats of misrecognition' (2020, 6). Third, participants strived to make sense of asylum policies and political discourses. In some cases, this sensemaking process entailed normalisation of refugee laws and discourses. Fourth, participants showed a capacity to reflect critically, challenging these policies and discourses. This can be compared to Korkiamäki and Gilligan's (2020, 6) findings about 'loud' and 'subtle' resistance. Fifth, participants became socially engaged, for example by trying to create a better understanding of refugees among Norwegians.

Honneth (1995) argued that feelings of being disrespected can become the motivational basis for social critique and social struggles for recognition. However, this study has suggested that misrecognition does not necessarily lead to struggles for recognition. Sometimes participants responded towards misrecognition with efforts to normalise anti-immigrant discourses and justify restrictive asylum policies rather than rejecting or challenging these. One explanation for such responses could be that participants preferred to struggle for recognition through interpersonal relationships, studies, and work. Another explanation for not struggling against misrecognition could be that they felt powerless and found it difficult to challenge seemingly unrelenting political systems and practices.

Simultaneously, participants showed subtle expressions of social critique and struggles for recognition. Taking into consideration the adversity and the powerful structural forces that constrained their agency, participants' capacity to build and sustain supportive relationships and make sense of their surroundings show that they are not passive victims but have a capacity to respond and act. The critical reflections expressed by participants could also indicate a potentiality for social change. Furthermore, the example of social engagement aimed at awareness raising is an expression of political agency at a societal level with potential to resist and challenge misrecognition over time.

Conclusion and implications

The concept 'ambivalent recognition' captures the ambivalence or duality of many young unaccompanied refugees' experiences of both recognition and misrecognition at an inter-relational, legal and societal level. This study shows that while legal recognition might represent an important port of safety to refugees, it does not necessarily bring along emotional and social recognition. While emotional recognition was provided through those social workers who were helping 'from the heart', participants also described experiences of misrecognition in encounters with social workers, the asylum system and public debate. This entailed a lack of recognition of participants experiences and needs, of their value and potential contributions to society, and of their profound need to live with their family, which affected their psychosocial wellbeing negatively.

Working for the emotional, legal and social recognition of young unaccompanied refugees should be a priority not only to social workers but also to authorities and policy-makers whose concern is to promote wellbeing and integration. The provision of psychosocial support to young unaccompanied refugees should go beyond the individual, taking into account their relationships as well as the powerful sociopolitical and legal forces shaping their wellbeing. Social workers and other helpers should recognise young unaccompanied refugees' lived experiences and meet them with emotional recognition, which involves loving care and a willingness to listen to their concerns. Participants' deep interconnection to their loved ones urgently calls for a legal recognition of refugees' right to family life. At a societal level, there is a need to counteract stereotypical and stigmatising anti-immigrant discourses, replacing mistrust and invisibility with a social recognition of young unaccompanied refugees' lived experiences, abilities and potential contributions to society. Moreover, participants showed a range of ways in which they strived to manage their experiences of misrecognition. These forms of resistance and other actions should be recognised, supported, and encouraged by social workers and other helpers as this can be a way forward towards recognition for these young people and contribute to improving their well-being.

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