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Complex dynamics in psychosocial work with unaccompanied minor refugees with uncertain future prospects: A case study

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Abstract

This case study explores the arriving process of an unaccompanied minor refugee in Germany and his perception of the psychosocial support he received. The aim is to elaborate possibilities to support refugee adolescents' arrival processes adequately. Two interviews—theme-centered and narrative—were conducted and afterwards examined by a group of five researchers who used experts' validation as the analyzing tool. Four main dimensions were identified contributing to the complex dynamics in psychosocial work with unaccompanied minor refugees: (a) the distinct need for self-determination and idealization, (b) the fight for state recognition as a legal refugee, (c) the attempt of achieving recognition by the society, and (d) the inability of building trusting and affective relationships with friends and caregivers in the host country. Thus, professionals working with unaccompanied minor refugees need to consider the adolescents' demand for self-determination and perceive idealization not only as a defense mechanism but also as a coping strategy to survive in an unpredictable environment. Being a reliable object that can be used by the adolescent can help to establish a trusting basis for the relationship. This case study indicates that approaches of psychosocial support with unaccompanied minor refugees need to acknowledge

and work with the interrelation between the inner world and the external reality of refugee adolescents.

1 | INTRODUCTION

According to the global report of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 14,400 unaccompanied refugee minors applied for asylum in Germany in 2015, the majority of them originating from Afghanistan (BAMF, 2016; UNHCR, 2016). Unaccompanied refugee minors are defined as children under the age of 18 who have fled their home country and have arrived in a receiving state without parents or other legal guardians (BAMF, 2014). For the protection and support of unaccompanied minors, Book VIII of the Social Code of German law specifies:

> When unaccompanied minors enter Germany, all necessary measures are to be taken to ensure the protection of the best interests of the child in the framework of the State's guardian role […], pursuant to the international legal provisions. The guiding principle of this Code is that each young person in Germany is entitled to receive support in his or her development and to be given assistance in growing into a responsible individual who is able to play his or her role in the community (Section 1 subs. 1 of Book VIII of the Social Code) (BAMF, 2018, p. 17).

Consequently, the initial treatment and psychosocial support of refugee minors in Germany should be assessed based on this mandate. The following article does not focus on measures, but rather examines the possibility of establishing a professional relationship with an unaccompanied refugee minor in order to assist the adolescent in dealing with past and present experiences and support his personal and social development. Psychosocial work with unaccompanied minors shortly after their arrival in Germany implies working within highly complex circumstances concerning the developmental phase of the young person (1.1.), traumatic experiences before, during and after flight (1.2.), and the psychosocial needs of adolescents living in a state of insecurity due to an uncertain refugee status (1.3.).

1.1 | Flight during adolescence

Apart from being unaccompanied and forced to migrate, adolescent refugees find themselves in the midst of a transitional developmental phase. Several developmental tasks during adolescence are associated with the transformation of relationships and the development of autonomy (Bohleber, 2011). The opportunity to make one's own choices and experience oneself as an actor within a potential space (Winnicott, 1971) or a psychosocial moratorium (Erikson, 1993) is stated as decisive for adolescent development in Western societies. Unfortunately, in Germany, these spaces are often not available to adolescent migrants and refugees (Günther, Wischmann, & Zölch, 2010). In fact, adolescent refugees are further confronted with a twofold transformational process (King, 2011), living through the *second* and *third individuation* processes simultaneously. While adolescence is called *the second individuation* process (Blos, 1967), indicating that childhood experiences can be reevaluated and at best transformed, migration is called *the third individuation* (Akhtar, 1995), since the migratory experience heavily destabilizes identity (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). Another dual requirement adolescent refugees are faced with the process of mourning. While

adolescence in psychoanalytical developmental literature sometimes is classified as the prototype of mourning (Wolfenstein, 1966), the same is true for migration. Van Essen (1999) and Volkan (2017) point to this phenomenon under the heading of *double mourning*. This concept indicates that adolescent refugees have to mourn their childhood, as well as the loss of their home country and, in the case of unaccompanied minors, the separation from their family. Whereas parents would normally support the adolescent to separate, minor refugees need to manage this process on their own. A third dimension, namely the mourning of traumatic experiences, might even widen the concept.

1.2 | Traumatization and its consequences

Forced migration is certainly a traumatic experience itself since the decision to flee is always based on compelling reasons to leave the home country without the possibility to return home in the near future. Moreover, the loss of home, relatives and close persons, familiar norms and cultural implicitness leads to feelings of uprootedness and forlornness (Leuzinger-Bohleber & Hettich, 2018a). Apart from this, the current escape routes to Germany are predominantly dangerous and a long-lasting endeavor. During flight, most refugees experience traumatic events such as acts of violence, sexual assault, robbery, shipwreck, extortion, captivity, exploitation, trafficking, and/or separation from family members or peers (Brücker et al., 2016; Krueger, 2018; Menesch & Keller, 2016; Ramel, Talljemark, Johansson, & Lindgren, 2015). Several systematic reviews revealed high prevalence rates of mental health disorders for minor refugees living in receiving countries (Bornstein & Montgomery, 2011; El Baba & Colucci, 2018; Vossoughi, Jackson, Gusler, & Stone, 2018; Witt, Rassenhofer, Fegert, & Plener, 2015). A recent systematic review found prevalence rates from 19 to 53% for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 10–33% for depression, and 9–32% for anxiety disorders (Kien et al., 2019). Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, and Cunniff (2008) showed that the risk of developing PTSD is significantly higher for unaccompanied refugee minors (61%) compared to refugee minors accompanied by caregivers (14%). In accordance with this, Jakobsen, Demott, and Heir (2014) reported high prevalence rates for PTSD (31%), depression (9%) and anxiety disorders (8%) among unaccompanied minor refugees shortly after their arrival in the host country and requested more mental health resources and treatment in the early stages of resettlement. The official criteria for PTSD are the exposure to or witnessing of a traumatic event, which "involved death or threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or threatened sexual violation" (APA, 2013 p. 271). Affected persons suffer from intrusive symptoms related to the traumatic event, try to avoid trauma-related triggers and experience negative changes in thoughts and mood, as well as in arousal. The symptoms must be present for more than 1 month and create considerable distress or affect negatively different aspects of their life areas (APA, 2013). However, the consequences of traumatization go beyond the defined criteria. Due to the helplessness experienced and unbearable fear during trauma, understanding of the world, as well as self-conception, are durably devastated (Fischer & Riedesser, 2009). As a result, traumatized people have difficulties trusting and establishing new and sustainable relationships. Due to the experience of total loss of agency during trauma, the sense of self-agency is permanently damaged (Herman, 2015). Consequently, even if refugees who suffered from traumatic experiences do not fulfill the defined criteria of PTSD, they might suffer from inner consequences, such as the loss of trust or self-agency.

1.3 | Psychosocial needs after flight

The concept of *sequential traumatization* developed by Hans Keilson is associated with an extended perspective on trauma. Keilson worked with Jewish orphans during and after the Second World War and studied their long-term development. His concept of *sequential traumatization* consists of three consecutive sequences—pre-persecution, peri-persecution, post-persecution—that cover children's experiences of persecution (Keilson, Sarphatie, Bearne,

Coleman, & Winter, 1992). Becker (2014) extended the concept and added three more sequences regarding the time after flight—the provisional nature of refugee status, the threat of deportation and/or return to the home country, and finally the transformation from being a refugee to becoming a migrant. *Sequential traumatization* thus defines forced migration as a traumatic process, including periods before and during flight, as well as the time of resettlement. The first sequence describes the time before flight and covers the rupture of the trusted environment until the decision to flee. The second sequence defines the time during flight, which is characterized by deprivation and the imperative need to survive. The third sequence, which applies to the initial time after the end of flight, includes the arrival in a safe country, as well as the insecurity faced with respect to the future due to an uncertain refugee status. Additionally, poor living conditions and few rights typify this sequence. The fourth sequence is defined by the chronic persistence of the provisional nature of the refugee's status and indicates the uncertain prospects of refugees. Especially for persons whose asylum procedure lasts for several years or for people living with only temporary suspension of deportation, which has to be renewed at the latest every 6 months, this sequence plays a crucial role (Becker (2014)).

The case presented below specifically focuses on the third sequence representing the initial period in a receiving country. This sequence proved to be essential as adequate psychosocial support shortly after persecution was found to be more important for a long-term positive developmental trajectory of children and youngsters than what happened to them while being persecuted (Keilson et al., 1992). In other words, the initial support of adolescent refugees has tremendous long-term effects on their development and ability to integrate. Various recent studies indicated this by emphasizing the influence of the post-migration environment and the fulfillment of psychosocial needs of refugee children and adolescents for their mental health and social development (Guruge & Butt, 2015; Hebebrand et al., 2016; Jakobsen et al., 2014; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Hettich, 2018b; Meemann & Meurs, 2019; Murray, 2016; Persson & Rousseau, 2012; Vervliet, Lammertyn, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2014). Nevertheless, only little research exists about the psychosocial needs of refugee adolescents during the initial time after their arrival in a receiving country. In a large-scale descriptive study, using qualitative content analysis, Lechner and Huber (2017) examined 104 adolescent refugees shortly after their arrival in Germany. Their study covered a broad range of themes (accommodation, education, relationships, health, asylum procedure, and discrimination) and indicated that the adolescent subjects positively experienced the support of social workers, but also acknowledged that social networks during relocation were not taken into account. Another study examined the psychosocial needs of adolescent refugees within the first year after arrival in the United Kingdom and revealed that youngsters showed characteristics of a clinical sample with symptoms of depression, PTSD, and anxiety disorders. The participants suffered from loss of trust, self-agency, and control and used existing social contacts predominantly as practical guidance rather than as emotional support. As a coping strategy, the adolescents primarily utilized avoidance (Groark, Sclare, & Raval, 2011). To meet the psychosocial needs of newly arrived adolescent refugees, Human Rights Watch requests immediate access to health screenings, prevention services, and psychotherapeutic treatment and underlines the importance of ensuring access to trained and experienced social workers and interpreters (HRW, 2016).

The aim of this article is to analyze how an unaccompanied minor refugee perceived the psychosocial support he received after arriving in Germany. Thereby, our case study serves as an example of the arriving process experienced by refugee minors fleeing without caregivers. This exploratory approach creates insights into the perception of the resettling journey, stirs up themes for further research and allows the development of adequate research strategies within the field (Datler, 1995).

2 | METHOD

The first author conducted two interviews with an 18-year-old male adolescent from Afghanistan. He arrived in Germany as an unaccompanied minor when he was 15 years old. The language of the interviews was German. In the context of our research, we assessed two different types of interviews. The first interview was "theme-centered"

and included an interview guideline to cover different dimensions relating to the research question. The guideline helped to cover all themes that the researchers determined before the interview. At the same time, it allowed the interviewer and the interviewee to change the sequence of topics or to exclude and add questions (Kurz, Stock-hammer, Fuchs, & Meinhard, 2007). The dimensions covered within the interview were: (a) daily life in Germany and previously, (b) psychosocial support, (c) family and friends, (d) inner processes, such as cognition and emotions, and (e) (mental) health. The interview took place, as proposed by the minor himself, in a café of the small city in which the young man was living at this time. It lasted 86 min. The second interview took place two and a half weeks later and can be described as a narrative interview. This kind of interview is more open and provides the interviewee the possibility of free speech following his own associations. The initial question invites the interview partner to tell his life story from a certain point in time. The interviewer listens, confirms and, if necessary, invites the interviewee to continue telling his story. At the end of the narrative, the interviewer has the possibility to ask questions on specific topics that came up during the interview and about other relevant themes (Küsters, 2014). In the case here presented, the interviewee was invited to tell his story commencing from the day of his arrival in Germany. Examining the process of his narrative, we realized that the young man spoke about the following topics: (a) first days in Germany, (b) studying (the German language), (c) changing accommodations and carers, (d) state support and the wish to be independent, and (e) rejection of the asylum application. The narrative interview took place sitting on a bench near a river. The interviewer also proposed meeting at her office, but the interviewee elected to talk outside. The interview lasted 49 min. The authors decided to conduct the semi-structured interview at the first meeting, as they believed it would ease the access to the adolescent and would help in building some kind of trust and openness for the second meeting and the narrative interview. Using two different types of interviews, we asked the adolescent, on the one hand, to talk about pre-determined dimensions from his perspective and, on the other hand, he could tell his story of resettlement following his own themes and associations.

After data collection, the interviews were transcribed in full and analyzed in an interdisciplinary interpretation group. The interpretation group consisted of four people: a male professor of child and adolescent developmental psychology who is also a child and adolescent psychoanalyst, a female post-doctoral researcher in educational science who is also a candidate to become a child and adolescent psychoanalyst, a female doctoral candidate in educational science and a female doctoral candidate in psychology.[1] The methodological approach of the experts' validation was used to be able to systematically recognize and correct subjective distortions, which might result from countertransference phenomena (Leuzinger-Bohleber, Engels, & Tsiantis, 2008; Leuzinger-Bohleber, Stuhr, Rueger, & Beutel, 2002). Initially, all members of the group received the transcripts of the two interviews before the first meeting and worked through them. During the first meeting, every member of the group spoke freely about impressions, associations, and feelings of transference as well as potential main themes and the process dynamics. Only after every participant of the group gave an initial statement, were all members invited to discuss on the basis of these statements. Thereby, specific text passages that struck the interviewer or another member of the interpretation group were also debated more deeply. Different readings, as well as different emotions, marking transference, and countertransference of the group members appeared and their meaning(s) were discussed. The discussion of the first meeting was protocolled after the session. The protocol was discussed as a first step of the second meeting. The field notes of the interviewer were included in the further discussion with the aim of enriching the dialogue about the interview dynamics. In the end, a shared interpretation of important manifest, as well as latent, topics and the interview dynamics resulted. Subsequently, these unfolding interview themes and dynamics were understood in the context of existing literature and previous research findings.

3 | RESULTS

The present case examines Hamid's[2] experiences, an 18-year-old man who came as an unaccompanied refugee minor to Germany. We begin this section with Hamid's biography and his need for self-determination (3.1.), before

we cover his perception of the German state (3.2.), his link to the German society including the interview dynamic (3.3.), and his personal relationships in Germany (3.3.). All sections follow the same structure: first we present Hamid's statements and quotations reporting the manifest content of the interviews, then we outline the considerations and readings of the interpretation group describing latent structures.

3.1 | Hamid's biography and the need for self-determination

Hamid was born in Afghanistan. He grew up in a small town in the countryside with his parents and his younger brother. During his childhood, Hamid went to school in the morning and played with friends in the afternoon. When he was about 10 years old, he started to work at a repair shop after school. Hamid lost his parents when he was around 11 years old. In the interviews, he does not mention the cause of his parents' death and hardly talks about his family. After the death of his parents, he was advised by an uncle to live with his family in a neighboring country. Hamid followed the uncle's advice and fled together with his little brother whom he did not mention again in the course of the interview. After some time, however, Hamid decided to continue the journey of his flight toward Europe. Describing this decision, Hamid emphasizes his own decision-making ability, his self-agency, and his independence.

> From {neighboring country in Asia} to {European transit country}, to Germany, I myself did decide. I did decide that this country is better than {neighboring country in Asia} and {European transit country}. I came all by myself with; I don't know whether you know these smugger, no idea, smagger, smeger? [I: Smuggler?] Smuggler, they bring other persons. I found them by myself, I talked to them myself, and I have found them by myself.[3]

Hamid lived and worked for several years in a transit country before he decided to cross the Mediterranean Sea. He made his way to Germany and arrived in the summer of 2015. In Germany, Hamid initially lived in a group for adolescent refugees and attended a German language course. With regard to his adult care figures, he mentions the friendly "boss" and one social worker who understood his mother tongue. After a few months, Hamid was transferred to another city where he lived in a hotel together with other adolescent refugees. He attended another German language course in the new city and was assigned to another carer. Some months later, Hamid had to change his living accommodations by moving to a hotel in yet another city. After this move, he went to a regular school attending an integration class and got a new social worker. With a fourth relocation, Hamid moved into another group in another city. He started to attend evening school classes and was assigned to a new carer. In general, Hamid describes his life in Germany as self-determined. He never mentions any negative affects or feelings of irritation about the changes of schools, accommodation, cities, or social workers. Hamid reports that, in order to become even more independent, he is looking for a full-time job and his own apartment. He thinks that 3 years dependency on state aid is enough.

> At the moment, I am searching for a job, working and renting a place to live, paying everything by myself and, like other people, having vacation and everything. Every day I am also thinking about this matter, this important matter, because it is not possible that the state always helps and we always say: "give me". I want to do things by myself.

Hamid's wish to become independent and earn enough money to pay for everything by himself seems like an act of self-determination and autonomy. Only in a short passage, he mentions that he is forced to leave youth welfare because of his age.

Because the people, they cannot stay any longer than 19 or 20 years of age. And I am also nearly 19.
Therefore, they say: "You are quite independent; you can go to another asylum camp."

Shortly after the two interviews took place, Hamid had to move to an asylum camp for adults. Considered as an adult, he no longer has an individual carer at his side. At the time of the interviews, conducted in 2018, Hamid was 18 years old and had lived in Germany for 3 years.

Hamid's effort to stay in control of decisions and keep autonomy even when it is almost impossible to have control over the course of events was salient for the interpretation group. His claim of self-determination can be understood as a defense against feelings of powerlessness and dependency. He makes meaning of his situation by perceiving every decision that is made for him as if it were his own. Probably, his decision to flee from the neighboring country when he was still a child could be understood as a reenactment of the initial ruptures of childhood. Hamid is used to leaving everything behind: his homeland, his family, and even his brother. Correspondingly, he describes cumulative losses in Germany (the constant changes of carers, residences, schools, and living conditions) as if settling down in a certain place is threatening. Being dependent or settled was, from childhood on, quite dangerous. It is an irony that the German care system for refugees, with its many transfers and resettlements, fits into this vulnerability of Hamid, yet at the same time makes it impossible for him to build up new internal representations of durability and trustworthiness in relationships.

3.2 | Hamid's perception of the German state

As for his most positive experience in Germany, Hamid reports his arrival day. He was especially moved by a letter written in his mother tongue, welcoming him to Germany. He felt as if he had "made it," having arrived in a safe country. In Germany, Hamid says, he feels treated as a human being. He appreciates that everyone has the same rights and obligations. In general, Hamid describes the German state aid as abundant and more than he could ever expect.

Important for me was, when I came to Germany, I did not know that in Germany I would get help and that I could visit school and that I would get a living place. I did not know this. They have organized a residence, they have organized a carer for me, they have organized schooling. All this was better for me, a better support. I could simply, like other people, go to visit a doctor supported by an insurance. That was the support that I had from, I did not expect it, but I could get these things in Germany.

The members of the interpretation group felt deeply touched by Hamid's description of being welcomed in Germany and his gratitude for the support he gets. Nevertheless, Hamid's idealized presentation of Germany stood out. The group was impressed, as well as astonished, by his attempt to talk only positively about his experiences in Germany. As the interpretation group discussed it, Hamid probably needs this kind of idealization as a first step to develop realistic ideals, yet, in the first encounters with some realities, he soon feels that this idealization is hard to maintain. The fragility of this idealistic picture appears in some passages when Hamid talks about his rejected asylum application. In this context, he mentions that he was sad and angry because he had done everything in order to arrive in Germany, and now he is faced with the threat of being sent back.

To the asylum application, always in this matter, whether I get a permission to stay or not, that is all the time, that is my life partner (laughs) and it remains mine, here, in my head (laughs). That is every day.

Overall, the interpretation group realized that Hamid perceives Germany as an ambivalent figure. On the one side, the German state offers basic supply and opportunities to live a good life. On the other side, the lack of security due

to his asylum status makes him feel unaccepted and merely, in a certain sense, tolerated. The uncertainty pervading his daily life becomes salient when he tells the interviewer that he is constantly waiting for the second asylum interview, as well as for a new decision on his asylum status. This overshadows his whole existence and the positive and sometimes idealized representation he originally had about the German state.

> I hope that, by the next interview, I will have the permission to stay, that I can stay restful in Germany, working, like a human being and then I find Germany perfect, for me.

3.3 | Hamid's link to the German society

During the interviews, Hamid emphasizes the importance to "make it" and to be seen as a good person in the eyes of others.

> All other people think that I am a good person. I try all these things so that other people will not gossip about me, but only say good things about me. That is it, I always try to succeed.

Nonetheless, Hamid describes several experiences of discrimination within and outside of school and elaborates that sometimes people talk in a very negative way about refugees, which hurts him deeply.

> And they said to me: "Why do these refugees have better notes at school?" So, why? We are also able to study, and they can too. For example, in the beginning, always I had a mini job, I always worked in the kitchen, I earned money, got my driver's license. And then, a German said to me: "Hey, why do you have a driver's license when you are only eighteen? I am twenty-five or twenty-four and I do not have one." I said: "You can work too; you can also try and succeed." He does not think about, what I tried to achieve, he only thinks about what I have.

However, Hamid states that he has to think as if he did not hear or see many things other people say or do regarding the attitude towards refugees. Thereby he denies bad affects and even minimizes or ignores other people's perception of him as a refugee.

> That does not bother me anymore. For example, in {neighboring country in Asia} they also say, in {European transit country}, in Germany, that is the third country where I am a refugee. To me, I do not care so much anymore about what the others say. I think about the real life.

To the interpretation group, it appeared that Hamid hopes for recognition by German society and by the German government. He wants to be seen as hard working and achieving. He tries to fulfill all assumed requirements and in return wants to be recognized as a good person. On the other hand, the interpretation group felt Hamid to be socially isolated. Although he suffers from experiences of discrimination, he tries to suppress his affects and wants to ignore or even forget all negative situations he has experienced. He probably needs to continue some of his idealizations after having survived flight and cumulative losses.

Hamid's ambivalence was also perceptible in the interview dynamic as the interpretation group discussed it. On the one hand, Hamid was willing to talk and tell his life-story in detail, thereby enjoying the interest in himself and his story. On the other hand, since he did not complain about any experiences he went through in Germany, he might have seen the interviewer as a German citizen. Even before the beginning of the first interview, he addresses the interviewer as if she would be part of the decision-making process and could influence the outcome of his asylum application:

Do whatever you want with the interview data, but do not deport me.

In addition, the second interview ends with an appeal, which seems to contain advice, not only for the German state, but also for the interviewer.

> Important is, important is that the people, that they will see, that the people that came here did not come on holiday, they were in a dangerous situation, they came here, they want to stay here, they want to work here, they want to live like humans. And I would like them to control very carefully, why the people came. Not just, they are deported and go back. Because it will become more difficult, one makes a risk out of his life to come to Germany.

Another moment revealing Hamid's ambivalence occurred after the second interview, when Hamid tells the interviewer that she wears the same skirt as his mother had, only in a different color. This moment of closeness and intimacy surprised the interviewer and led to the realization that Hamid had projected the image of his mother onto the her. In this moment, the interviewer asks herself what this reference might mean and if there is any of Hamid's expectations of motherly care in this comment. Taking this moment into account, the interpretation group realized that the interviewer is a projection surface for Hamid's struggle between closeness and distance, both concerning German society and people and health care workers who offer him any kind of relationship or point of connection.

3.4 | Hamid's personal relationships in Germany

When asked about whom he contacts when he does not feel well, Hamid reports that he prefers to take a walk. He walks and listens to music until he feels better and can escape from the bad situation. Asked further, he says that he contacts his carer only in the case of bureaucratic questions or issues. For private problems, as Hamid calls them, he contacts his Afghan friends.

> Who I am talking to? Rather to my co-citizens, because they are in the same situation as I am and they understand me better. When I am in the company of a German or someone from another country and when I talk a bit, yes, then she or he understands everything, she can listen to me and hear everything I tell, but she cannot feel with me. When I speak with an Afghan person, he has been in the same situation as I am, he can give me better advice about what I can do, how I can create a good life.

Hamid states that all his friends are of equal importance to him. He even says that so far, he has never had a special person in his life.

When Hamid talks about his social workers, he describes all of them as very friendly and nice and he emphasizes that he has never had any problems with them. He even presents the many changes of his carers as useful, functional, and positive. He justifies this by highlighting their language skills, which always matched his abilities.

> Everything was good, but for me also another thing was better. Since the social worker from {village A} and {village B} and also that woman who works in the youth welfare office, they all spoke {language of the European transit country} and therefore I did not always need a translation. I could also speak this language. I could explain my problems better than others could. And afterwards in {village C}, it was also better that I was able to speak a bit German, in that, in that period I learned German.

Talking about his current social worker, he mentions that it is the first time that he has his own personal carer and lists the things she has taught him.

> And the situation got a lot better for me. She had more time for me, she could do a lot more things for me when I needed something, appointments. I learned a lot from her, how to make an appointment, how to find someone from the administration staff for example, she also helped me a lot with writing letters.

For Hamid, it seems important to mention that not only had he learned from his carer, but she had also learned from him. He was her first adolescent client, as well as the first refugee she was working with.

> Now she can better understand youngsters, feel what, for example, sometimes when I speak about my past, probably in the beginning she thought we are here now, we do not have problems. Also, I always talk with her about my past or something like that and now she can understand and feel better.

Within the interpretation group, the idea was raised that Hamid tries to keep his feelings under control. Instead of turning to a reference person when feeling unwell, his preferred coping strategy is to stay on his own. Contacting his friends seems to be only his second choice. In his opinion, a friend is only a friend when he goes through the same experiences and faces similar problems. Although the relationships to his friends and to his carers seem to be superficial and functional, there is a slight difference in the relationship to his current social worker, whom he calls his personal carer. In the context of his representations of friends and others, the interpretation group is touched by the many ruptures Hamid experienced during his life. The group has the feeling that those ruptures are one reason for Hamid having great difficulties establishing new trustful relationships. In addition to all past disruptions, Hamid also takes into account new and unforeseeable terminations of his current relationships. The most severe rupture, however, would be a deportation to Afghanistan. In addition, the constant changes and moves within Germany do not allow Hamid to rely on any relationship.

In discussing Hamid's relationships to his carers, the interpretation group was preoccupied with the representation a refugee minor internally has regarding the support from caregivers. This topic was especially discussed against the background of Germany's legal regulations and the habitual practices of transferring unaccompanied minor refugees within Germany. After arriving in Germany an unaccompanied minor refugee, such as Hamid, is taken into provisional care by the youth welfare office of the city, he arrives in. The adolescent undergoes a clearing procedure before being transferred to another municipality with available accommodations for unaccompanied minor refugees. Thereby, the adolescent has no right to object this relocation. According to the regulations of the admission procedure for unaccompanied minor refugees in Germany this initial relocation should take place within 7 days after the adolescent's arrival in the country. However, the process often takes longer, such as with Hamid, who was only relocated after 3 months. Once the adolescent has arrived at the second location, another youth welfare office takes responsibility. Although this youth welfare office stays responsible for the adolescent, he might have to move after the initial relocation as accommodations for unaccompanied minor refugees are often being closed. Hamid had to change his place of living twice after his initial transfer. Apart from the restlessness that these relocations cause, they also result in the change of caregiving professionals. Since the carers are part of the accommodations, the adolescent's reference person changes with every relocation. This prevents the establishment of a long-term relationship with only one caregiving person and exposes the adolescent to unstable and unpredictable living conditions.

4 | DISCUSSION

Hamid's case illustrates social, as well as psychological, difficulties unaccompanied adolescent refugees are faced with during their resettlement process in Germany. His case also hints at challenges professionals experience when working with unaccompanied minors shortly after they arrive in Germany. The discussion will follow three lines of

development: Hamid's strategies of self-determination and idealization to cope with his living conditions (4.1.); the implications of the external realities Hamid experienced during his asylum and resettling process in Germany (4.2.); and his (in)ability to establish and use trustful relationships (4.3.). As we discuss and contextualize the results, we will also share some considerations about practical implications for psychosocial work with unaccompanied minors in Germany.

4.1 | Self-determination and idealization as coping strategies

Due to Hamid's past of losing his parents early in his life and living as a refugee in countries without national resources supporting refugees, he was left on his own accord and had to develop some kind of (forced) autonomy (Rohr, 2014), which can be seen as his psychological chance of survival. Staying in Germany as an adolescent asylum seeker with an uncertain future and almost no potential space for practicing self-development, it is understandable that Hamid wants strictly to uphold his autonomy. He describes his experiences in Germany in a very active language, as if he decided every change of accommodation, school, or social worker. He thereby claims his autonomy and self-agency and focuses on his ability to intervene in the world, which is understood as a fundamental need for people living under precarious conditions (Marcus, 1999). Even with all the previous and current constraints and his limited options of choice, Hamid uses the remaining freedom to choose his own attitude, although he might not be able to influence the course of matters. The upholding of a positive and, above all, a self-determined position serves Hamid as a coping strategy and prevents him from becoming desperate and hopeless (Bettelheim, 1960). As he describes the changes of carers as helpful and appropriate, Hamid also tries to make meaning out of his experiences. This also serves as a coping strategy and was revealed as an important resource when living under poor conditions (Frankl, 1963). Hamid can only count on his own interpretations to maintain a sense of self and self-agency. Hamid's emphasis on autonomy, self-agency, a positive attitude, and his meaning making represent resilient components helping Hamid to keep up hope and confidence for his present, as well as his future, life. From this perspective, one can also understand Hamid's idealization of Germany as a coping strategy to survive within an insecure and unpredictable world, after a life course filled with loss, trauma, and the breakdown of former prospects and relationships. Initially, he needs idealization to survive, which might help in the long term to establish a positive self and object representation, and later become transformed from idealization to realistic ideals.

When working with unaccompanied refugee minors, it is essential to be aware of the fact that most of them were self-reliant for quite some time before they arrived in Germany. Therefore, it is vital to take into account their individual story and history of autonomy when trying to integrate them into the German youth welfare system, with all its rules and regulations. Moreover, the upholding of self-agency and meaning making within their precarious situation might be reasonable to support, although it might feel hypocritical to the professional carers with respect to their own feelings toward the refugee's situation. The same applies to the tendency toward idealization. It is important to recognize that professionals' expectation of tolerance for ambivalence is problematic for refugees given the fact that, under their circumstances, idealization, and denial are almost necessary mechanisms to survive. After the breakdown of expectations, the joint search for new possibilities for idealizations is important for the maintenance of hope and for a sense of a future for the adolescent. This stance might be contrary to the claim of political advocacy of social work and the professionals' emancipatory desires, but the professional effort should initially be based on the client's needs (Witzel, 2018).

4.2 | External realities and their implications

One major determinant of the inability of Hamid to feel accepted and recognized lies within the insecurity of his future prospects as they rest on the question of whether he will receive refugee status. The unpredictable response

to his request for asylum and the power of Germany's legal framework account in a significant way for the difficulties in Hamid's resettling process. Additionally, the above described unstable living conditions in which he is caught prevent stabilization and feelings of being safe and being able to settle in one place. In other words, Hamid is trapped in the fourth traumatic sequence by the chronic nature of his provisional status (Becker, 2014). This finding is in accordance with various studies indicating that the insecurity and daily stressors during an ongoing asylum procedure are experienced as a great burden and influence the mental health of refugees and their quality of life tremendously (Hebebrand et al., 2016; Montgomery, 2010; Vervliet et al., 2014). Professionals working with adolescent refugees should be aware of this dynamic and constantly include considerations concerning external realities in all interventions.

Another external societal dimension includes Hamid's experiences of discrimination. While Hamid denies the impact of these situations on his perception of Germany, he also mentions bad feelings appearing in relation to occurrences of discrimination. These experiences might be one reason why Hamid stays mainly within his original cultural context and establishes his social relationships almost exclusively with Afghan friends, for they speak the same language, have the same life experience and have been raised within the same cultural system. As Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder (2006) found, experiences of discrimination are one of the major factors causing migrant youth to separate from the host country's culture. Although Hamid lives within Germany, he only touches German life on the edges, at the outer layers, and then falls back on his own, distances himself or detaches. Hamid is part of Germany but only on the margins. He touches these margins from time to time and afterwards finds himself remaining an outsider. Hamid mentions these experiences in various parts of the interviews and describes situations in daily life in which he did not feel part of German society and/or normality.

> I went back to a normal school. It was a school, but not with these German people. We couldn't sit with them in one room, but they were all foreigners.
> I am not like the other people who have a passport and go on vacation. If I had a passport, I would be on vacation somewhere now. This holiday season should mean going on vacation.

Although Hamid feels treated equally by German officials, he does not feel accepted by society.

> Everything is good with the authorities. I don't find any difference between Germans and others there. They only use these rules, the law that is appropriate.
> Sometimes two people talk about refugees and say - and for example sometimes I think they judge quickly. I also heard on TV that someone killed a girl. Of course, that is bad. But people think that all refugees are like that. But that is not true. Every country has bad and good people, and I'm also sad because one person killed a girl, and that's not good, it's bad.

Given Hamid's description of the feeling of not truly belonging to German society, he would need experiences that introduce him further into a German sphere, creating moments of transition into that sphere and moments of transitional space (Winnicott, 1971). One important challenge in working with Hamid would therefore be the promotion of borderlinking[4] opportunities (Devisch, 2011). Borderlinking requires openness from the professional to interactions with new and unfamiliar (cultural) beliefs of the adolescent that can be reprehensible or inconsistent with one's own norms and beliefs. In the process of borderlinking, the prior recognition of one's own views and the reduction of Eurocentric and postcolonial perspectives by the professional facilitates the listening to the adolescent's ideas about the world without judgment and allows the professional to become "a legitimate mediator or cultural mediator" (Devisch, 2006, p. 143). The use of borderlinking when working with refugee adolescents promotes the adolescent's empowerment and the development of a shared understanding of the world between the professional and the adolescent. The professional is able to get closer to the adolescent's cultural norms and beliefs while at the same time the adolescent can become more familiar with the perspectives of the professional and the host country's culture.

During the conversation with Hamid, the interviewer tried to provide spaces for borderlinking by inviting him to talk about his home on the one hand and his thoughts and feelings about his experiences in Germany on the other hand. The interviewer was open to Hamid's ideas without judging the statements. Against the background of this invitation Hamid describes difficulties of developing his life in a new country.

> You have to forget a lot of things: sit with the family, talk to the family, the father and the mother. [...] If I were in Afghanistan now, I could have my own repair shop because that is my home. I wouldn't have to think about applying for asylum. I wouldn't have to feel like a refugee. It would be my home and I could do anything. But I fled and had to forget a lot of things [...] I had to think about another life. A new life and how I can, and where I can find - not my home - but a place where I can feel a little safer. And start a second life.

He also talks about traditional things that he misses from home and how he integrates them into his life in Germany.

> This is an instrument; in my mother tongue we say Rabab. [...] I can play it a bit. When I was a kid, I liked this instrument. I still like it and not just me, all Afghans. [...] The old music of Afghanistan. If someone listens briefly this person goes straight to Afghanistan with his thoughts. But the person who plays the instrument stays in the song.

In terms of borderlinking, Hamid tries to appreciate both German and Afghan culture and wishes for mutual openness and understanding in society.

> I think about all cultures that there is no wrong culture. They are all a bit different. For example, I think that many things in German culture are better than in my culture and many things in my culture are better than in Germany [...].
> Living a little bit friendly is important. It is important to understand each other. Not only thinking about yourself, but also about others is important. Because we are all human and we only live once. This time we have to understand each other and understand what is different between us. Don't always say I'm right or the other person is right.

4.3 | The (in)ability to establish and use trusting relationships

Hamid describes social relationships with friends and personal carers merely as functional. Friendships are required for getting advice, whereas the relationships to his carers are to learn about bureaucratic tasks and challenges. When Hamid says: "You cannot count on the world," he might even mean one cannot count on relationships and refers to the countless changes and ruptures, the instability, and the losses he had experienced during his life. As far as we know, his losses began with an attachment trauma (Schore, 2009) caused by the death of his parents and the permanent loss of his attachment figures. Furthermore, Hamid went through numerous losses of relevant relationships as for example the loss of contact with his brother and other relatives. Living as a refugee in different countries, he constantly experienced changes and unforeseeable losses, which continue to this day. These ongoing ruptures of living locations and especially of relationships lead to an incapacity to build new ties (Streeck-Fischer, 2014). These experiences have also weakened Hamid's sense of self as a child and an adolescent, a self that can only be developed within a context that is durable, stable, and/or trustworthy enough. Without such a context, the sense of self can be significantly weakened by the destruction and trauma he endured and/or was witness to. In the reflection of German culture, Hamid hopes to discover a more coherent image of himself, but this is an emergent process that is broken by experiencing new rejections and unpredictable relocations within Germany. From this perspective, it might be a good adaptive strategy not to

establish emotional relationships and to only focus on functional contacts. Being avoidant in relationships to carers implies trivializing trauma and refusing conversation about attachment relevant experiences or losses and feelings of despair (Muller, 2010). In Hamid's case, this can be evidenced in the fact that he hardly mentions his brother or his parents, not even the cause of their death or the emotional consequences their loss had for him. It seems as if Hamid has split off this trauma as it is unbearable to remember. In the interview, it felt as if there was an invisible wall the interviewer should not cross over, but rather continue with some of the information missing. The disruption of the avoidance and the process of remembrance and mourning is a long-lasting process in psychotherapy that might not be commenced or accomplished within a relationship of uncertain length (Herman, 2015).

However, it is relevant to know about the avoidant tendencies in traumatized adolescents and be aware of the possibility that unaccompanied minors might behave as if everything was just fine while avoiding getting into contact with the Other, as well as with the self and the traumatic, experiences. Being aware of this dynamic makes the adolescent's ambivalence between closeness and distance more understandable (Keilson et al., 1992; Van Essen, 1999) and enables the social worker to offer moments of transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) that the adolescent can use. This is when the relationship gets more personal, less detached, and functional. Such moments within the relationship to a care figure are the initial point to create moments of feeling held. In the long term, the minor may then be able to encounter the Other, which means deepening contact with others and the self.

This idea is also inherent in the concept of object use. Winnicott (1971) separates the use of an object clearly from an object relation, which includes the occupation of the object, as well as projection and identification. In an object relation, the object is not fully part of the outer world but of the self. Object relations serve as the basis of object use. To be able to use an object, it has to be destroyed and experienced as real and outside of the self. The requirement, however, is the survival of the object (Winnicott, 1971). It has to survive destruction and aggression by the subject by staying reliable and showing consistency. Subsequently, it can function as a bridge between the inner world and the outer reality and bring them psychosocially together. The object becomes reliable because it is real and not part of the omnipotence of the self (Oliner, 2015). Oliner (2015), as well as Winnicott (1971), mention the importance of external reality and consequently the necessary flexibility in the working process of therapy. This finding also applies to psychosocial work with unaccompanied minor refugees, since the living conditions of these young people are highly dynamic as well as precarious and have enormous impact on the adolescents' opportunities in life. It is therefore essential to be flexible and constantly adapt the work process to their external reality.

Working with unaccompanied minor refugees, the ability to survive the destruction and aggression of the adolescent and staying a reliable object allows for the basis of a trusting alliance, which might lead to the ability of the adolescent to use oneself as an object. In this case, to survive means not only to stay present but also to not psychologically withdraw (Oliner, 2015). This is highly relevant when working with traumatized people because, as described above, they show a tendency to avoid, protecting themselves against new traumatization and against getting misinterpreted. Traumatized people are often unable to use an object because they try to stay within the perspective of omnipotence, keeping the object as something under their control (Oliner, 2015). Giving the object a real place in the outer world would also mean giving autonomy to the object (Winnicott, 1971). It is therefore important to create possibilities for identification as a first step when working with unaccompanied minor refugees. Moreover, the mirroring of feelings, cognitions, and needs is crucial to signal a secure base for an object relationship with the adolescent.

5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Hamid's case reveals various challenges and opportunities of psychosocial work with unaccompanied minor refugees. First, the appreciation of forced autonomy which is experienced by unaccompanied minor refugees before and during flight and the recognition of the unpredictable living conditions adolescents live through in the host country can help to explain their need for self-determination and idealization as coping strategies. Professionals can use this knowledge by helping adolescents to maintain their idealistic ideas of the present and the future, thus

preserving adolescents' hopes and creating perspectives for them. Second, it is important for professionals to establish a flexible work process and adapt constantly to the adolescents' external reality considering the minors' unpredictable and changing living conditions and experiences of discrimination in the host country. Third, the dilemma of refugee adolescents living psychologically at the border of the host society can be countered by having professionals open to other perspectives and providing an intercultural potential space and opportunities for borderlinking to empower refugee adolescents and develop a shared understanding of the world. Fourth, apart from offering a trusting relationship—which often cannot be maintained reliably—professionals should also try to be a reliable and useable object for the adolescents and thus create opportunities for identification to prevent adolescents from only linking with others in a functional and avoiding way. Hamid's case generally illustrates that working with unaccompanied minor refugees demands questioning one's own ideas and aspirations and being open to working within a highly complex field in which bringing the adolescents' outer and inner world closer together is one of the main requirements.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was approved by the Ethic committee of the department of Human Sciences of the University of Kassel and it conforms to recognized standards. The subject gave informed consent prior to the inclusion in the study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Our gratitude goes to Dr. Susanne Benzel and Stefanie Kurth who supported this research with their expertise.

[2] We changed the adolescent's name and modified some personal details to maintain anonymity.

[3] We translated all quotations from German into English and smoothed them linguistically for better readability.

[4] The concept of borderlinking originates from Bracha L. Ettinger's matrixial theory which initiated a new perspective on (trans)subjectivity, artistic work, and the feminine. She stated that "[...] a spiritual knowledge of the Other and the Cosmos is born and revealed [...] by borderlinking one's own soul-psyche to the breath of the psyche of the other and to the spirit of the Cosmos. In each particular copoiesis [joint process of creation, authors' note] with the Other or with the Cosmos, being-with and being-in is 'self'-differentiation and individuation within transgressive reattunement [...]" (Ettinger, 2005, p. 708). René Devisch adopted this concept with regard to cultural intersubjectivity and indicated that "both matrixial borderlinking relations and complex (counter)transference are at play in the long-dated intercultural encounter and engagement with one another's worldview and values [...]" (Devisch, 2007, p. 98).

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