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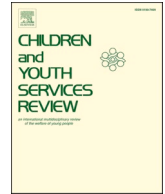
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# Unaccompanied, but not alone: A systematic review of the influence of social relationships on the transition of unaccompanied refugee adolescents to adulthood

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## ABSTRACT

Unaccompanied refugee adolescents often have few years to get settled in their host country before they transition to (a nominal) adulthood. This transition does not take place in a social vacuum. Between arriving and ageing out of care, pre-existing social relations are re-negotiated and new relations are formed. A systematic literature search was conducted in academic journals, focused on the influence of social relations on the transition to adulthood of unaccompanied refugee adolescents. The resulting 71 articles were qualitatively reviewed with reference to the social relations of unaccompanied adolescents, the transition challenges that they influence and the mechanism of influence. Four major challenges were identified as a result: 'Achieving education and employment', 'Preparing for and living independently', 'Building a social network', and 'Developing a sense of identity and feelings of belonging'. Each of an adolescent's social relations has their own (non-)supporting influence on these challenges, which can be complementary or contrasting with the influence of other relations. This review therefore emphasises the importance of a holistic view on an adolescent's social network in studying and working with transition challenges.

## 1. Introduction

On arrival in a host country, unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors are often in the final years of their transition to a nominal adulthood. Between 2016 and 2020, more than 71 percent of the unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in an EU member state were 16 years or older. Over 90 percent were 14 years or older and 73 percent were described as male (Eurostat, 2022). Many countries in the global north, which constitute the majority of study sites in this review, have formal asylum and care systems with pathways to long-term residency. In those systems, adolescents<sup>1</sup> who apply for asylum without a parent or responsible relative present are often placed in either foster or residential care. As the right to youth care often ends around the age of 18, unaccompanied adolescents may only have a few years at the most to get settled and orient themselves towards an independent future.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents can form new social

relationships, or renegotiate pre-existing ones upon arrival in a new country. In countries with formalised asylum systems, they are generally assigned a guardian and provided with other professional assistance and guidance upon arrival to help them settle and prepare for a future. This preparation is either aimed at a future in the host country or, if an adolescent's asylum application is rejected, in the country of origin (e.g. Kulu-Glasgow et al., 2018; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). In other countries, these supporting roles might be fulfilled on an ad-hoc, informal basis or be altogether absent (Shepler, 2010). New friendships can also form and adolescents may regard foster or other carers as a new kind of family (Chase, 2020; Wade, 2019). Moreover, digital means of communication, if available, enable transnational connections and the continuation of relationships between adolescents and family abroad (Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015; Pérez & Salgado, 2019), a possible 'transnational family life' (cf. Bryceson, 2019). Unaccompanied minors' transition to adulthood takes place in the context of these networks.

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<sup>1</sup> Our use of the term 'adolescent' refers to 'a young person who is developing into an adult' (cf. Cambridge Dictionary, Cambridge University Press, n.d.) and is not intended to reflect a fixed age range. 'Refugee adolescents' refers to asylum-seeking adolescents or adolescents who were granted a refugee status.

The definition of ‘adulthood’ can differ greatly between the actors involved with an adolescent, as can perceptions of when someone is an ‘adult’. These concepts are social constructs, and as such their meaning is dependent on the social and geographical contexts in which they are used (Montgomery, 2009; Sirriyeh, 2016). Therefore, how the transition to adulthood is defined and which outcomes are seen as desirable may also vary among the individuals and the networks with which adolescents interact.

From a policy or legal perspective, becoming an adult is often uniformly defined through notions about age, rather than broader social definitions. The age of 18, the age limit of ‘childhood’ according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Art. 1), usually marks the end of the care and protections assigned to adolescents. From a social perspective, ‘adulthood’ in ‘Western’ countries might correlate with ‘self-reliance’ or ‘competence’, whereby achievements such as housing, education or financial independence mark a completed childhood or successful transition from care (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). In Bourdieuan terms, this ‘Western’ adulthood is then achieved through the accumulation of economic and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1986). However, ‘adulthood’ in an adolescent’s country of origin might be based on different views of a ‘successful’ transition, for example through additional familial responsibilities, such as labour, or care for younger siblings (Montgomery, 2009). Gendered norms in in both the country of origin and the host country can also shape adolescents’ expectations, experiences, responsibilities and potential vulnerabilities (Pedraza, 1991). Furthermore, migration experiences may accelerate an adolescent’s transition to adulthood (Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018) and affect their relationships and sense of self (Varvin et al., 2022). For adolescents themselves, identification as an ‘adult’ might be linked to the degree of agency that they experience in taking control of their own future, as opposed to one that is determined by the opinions of professionals or the rules and regulations in legal or asylum systems (Chase, 2020).

The presence or absence of a social network influences the outcome of any adolescent’s transition to adulthood, as does a network’s size, degree of cohesion and the strength of the social ties within it (Blakeslee, 2012). Literature on non-refugee care leavers shows that the absence of a non-professional support network negatively impacts the chances of finding housing or employment and increases reliance on welfare systems (Geenen & Powers, 2007). In contrast, continued relationships with former foster carers can, for example, help facilitate the transition of young adults towards independent living (Wade, 2019).

Adolescents can develop multiple belongings to family or social networks in both the host country and the country of origin (Chase, 2020). Each of these networks, whether physically present or not, can exert an implicit or explicit influence on the adolescent, encouraging them to pursue an ‘adulthood’ in accordance with the general ideas or practices within that network (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). These physically present or transnational relationships can act as a source of support but can also be a source of pressure to meet certain expectations or responsibilities (Chase, 2020; Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015; Pérez & Salgado, 2019).

This systematic review aims to answer the question: ‘How do the various social relationships of unaccompanied refugee adolescents influence their transition to adulthood in their host country?’ To our knowledge, the process of growing up ‘transnationally’, or the role of family and other actors both abroad and in close proximity to the lives of unaccompanied refugee adolescents, has not yet been systematically reviewed. Given the possible influence that social networks have on the outcomes of an adolescent’s transition to adulthood – as one of the structures in which the agency or choices of adolescents take place – this knowledge will contribute to our understanding of important moments during the life course and transition to adulthood of unaccompanied adolescent refugees.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Search strategy

Our selection of search terms is based on keywords in the literature on transitioning to adulthood, refugee adolescents and local as well as transnational social practices. We chose to maintain a broad search scope in order to include the broadest possible variety of, for example, views on ‘adulthood’ and the definition of the concept of ‘family’ in relation to unaccompanied refugee adolescents. This includes our use of the term ‘refugee’. Different multilateral agreements, such as the 1951 and 1967 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, provide widely used, but differing definitions of who may be considered a ‘refugee’ and who not. Furthermore, in broader societal or political discourse, the designation of refugee status might not correspond with a refugee’s self-identification (Kyriakides, 2017). In order to include a broad perspective on ‘refugeehood’, we have chosen not to define refugees beforehand, but to follow the descriptions of participants in the studies in our search. We thereby included both youth seeking asylum and those described as ‘refugees’ in our key terms. Table 1 provides an overview of the search terms.

We searched the following databases: Web of Science, PsycINFO, SOCindex, IBSS and Scopus. Furthermore, in the full-text reviewing phase, reference lists of publications were checked for additional relevant sources. Our search was aimed at articles published in academic, peer-reviewed journals between January 1990 and March 2021.<sup>2</sup> Our search results show that the topic of unaccompanied refugee adolescents and their transition to adulthood was, comparatively speaking, not researched much in the 1990s. During the 1990s, which make up one third of the time period investigated, only 88 studies out of a total yield of 1030 (8.5 %) were published.

### 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We included *peer-reviewed, empirical, English-language* studies in the social and behavioural sciences presenting research on the influence of *social relationships* on the various aspects of the *transition to adulthood of unaccompanied refugee adolescents*. As definitions of childhood differ

**Table 1**  
Overview of Search Terms.

Aspects of the research question	Search terms
Transitioning to adulthood	adult* OR adulting OR “adult life” OR agency OR “aging out” OR becom* OR choice OR decision OR future OR “growing up” OR “grown-up” OR independent* OR “key moment” OR “leaving care” OR “life choice” OR liminal* OR mature OR “preparation for*” OR self-dependen* OR self-relian* OR transition* OR 18+ AND
Relationships	family OR foster OR friend* OR guardian OR mentor OR network OR parent* OR relation* OR peer OR social OR volunteer AND
Transnationalism	abroad OR digital OR distan* OR transnational* AND
Networks in the host country	(family OR foster OR friend* OR guardian OR mentor OR network OR parent* OR relation* OR peer OR social OR volunteer) NOT (abroad OR digital OR distan* OR transnational*) AND
Minor	adolescen* OR child* OR infant* OR kid* OR minor* OR teen* OR young* AND
Refugee	asylum* OR displace* OR fled OR flee OR “forced migrat*” OR refugee AND
Unaccompanied	alone OR separated OR unaccompanied

<sup>2</sup> We performed our literature search on 1 March 2021.

depending on socio-cultural context (Montgomery, 2009), we did not set a hard age limit for the inclusion of studies regarding unaccompanied adolescents. However, we excluded studies describing the influence of general societal discourse, or studies that did not describe the nature of the relationship between adolescents and those actors who were considered influential.

We included studies on minors with a *refugee* background, who were *unaccompanied* when they arrived in their host country. Studies about unaccompanied minors whose parents later joined them were included if this pre- and post-reunification distinction was properly described. Studies of mixed groups, such as labour migrants and refugees, were included if this distinction was clearly made. We excluded studies focusing on mental health issues (or their prevalence) of unaccompanied adolescents, if there was no clear link to social relationships.

We also excluded comments, interviews, literature reviews and other non-empirical studies. Based on the reviews and studies included, the reference lists were scanned for further relevant *empirical* studies. These were subsequently included in the review.

We only included studies with a sufficient *research quality*. Studies were assessed using 18 appraisal questions based on four guiding principles, which entail that the research: 1. contributes to the advance of wider knowledge or understanding, 2. is defensible in design, 3. is rigorous in conduct and 4. is credible in claim (Spenser et al., 2003).

In order to improve the quality of the selection, check the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and reduce the influence of possible subconscious biases of the researchers, a sample of 10 percent of the literature was independently in- or excluded by a second researcher during the title and abstract selection phases. Expressed in Cohen's Kappa, the consensus between the researchers was moderate ( $\kappa = 0.42$ ) and good ( $\kappa = 0.82$ ), respectively (cf. Landis & Koch, 1977). In both phases, the second researcher excluded more literature than the first. No literature was excluded by the first researcher that was later deemed relevant and included. Whenever a study was included or excluded by one researcher, but not by the other, the researchers discussed the discrepancy and reached a consensus regarding its inclusion or exclusion.

### 2.3. Selection process

Our initial search yielded 1,475 results in academic journals or books. Of these, 445 were duplicates, leaving 1,030 studies for the title screening phase. In this phase, 503 studies were excluded on the basis of failing the inclusion criteria. From the remaining 527 studies, the abstracts were evaluated on the basis of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This resulted in the further exclusion of 328 studies. The full text of the remaining 199 articles was assessed, with 136 studies excluded in this phase, resulting in the inclusion of 63. Screening reference lists yielded 8 additional relevant studies, which were subsequently included. This resulted in the final inclusion of 71 studies in this systematic review (see Fig. 1).

In the abstract and full-text screening phases, studies were excluded based on the following grounds (these refer to the first reason for exclusion that was encountered, while some studies may have met multiple exclusion criteria): does not answer the research question of this review ( $n = 119$ ); focus solely on mental health issues ( $n = 87$ ); literature reviews, commentary or other non-empirical studies ( $n = 71$ ); describes adolescents' transitions but not their social relationships ( $n = 62$ ); focus on adults ( $n = 30$ ); not focusing on unaccompanied adolescents or not making a distinction between accompanied and unaccompanied adolescents ( $n = 29$ ); focus on general discourse or non-specific relationships ( $n = 19$ ); focus on non-refugees or no distinction between refugees and non-refugees ( $n = 19$ ); non-English languages ( $n = 11$ ); focus on methodology or ethics ( $n = 10$ ); insufficient research quality ( $n = 4$ ); and non-peer-reviewed articles ( $n = 3$ ).

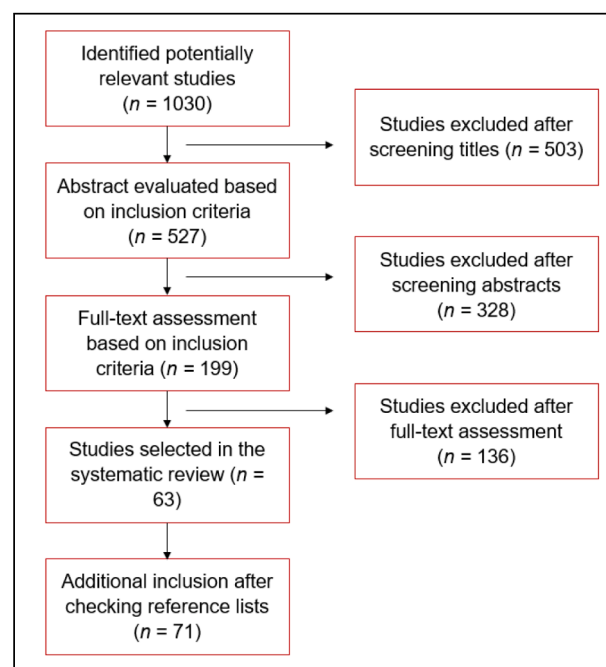


Fig. 1. Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process.

### 2.4. Data analysis

The text of the results sections of the studies included was coded inductively using Atlas.ti v.9, through subsequent steps of open and axial, and selective coding (Bernard, 2006). Our aim was to code as inclusively as possible in the initial coding stages, with particular attention to discreet descriptions of actors, behaviours and possible influences during the transition of refugee adolescents to adulthood. After this open coding step, we identified commonalities in the descriptions of separate individual actors and influences, and formulated six overarching categories of adolescents' possible social relationships and four transition challenges, respectively. We thereby took care to formulate categories that encompassed all different forms of relationships and challenges that were described in the data. After identifying the separate transition challenges, we further identified two broader, latent outcomes that characterise unaccompanied adolescents' challenges during their transition to adulthood.

## 3. Results

In this section, we discuss the influence of the various social relationships that unaccompanied refugee adolescents maintain on important experiences and events in their host country and country of origin during their transition to adulthood. Our results are based on the literature included in this review ( $n = 71$ ), the full characteristics and designs of which are presented in Appendix 1. Most of the studies in our literature yield were conducted in Europe ( $n = 57$ ) and North America ( $n = 11$ ), in countries that have extensive systems for the recognition and reception of refugees and care for unaccompanied minors. Most studies ( $n = 61$ ) are qualitative in nature, with a minority having a mixed ( $n = 9$ )<sup>3</sup> or quantitative ( $n = 1$ ) design. Most of the studies included are based on the perspectives of unaccompanied adolescents and 67 were based on data collection among unaccompanied adolescents or young adults. The remaining studies solely on research among

<sup>3</sup> Some studies consisted of multiple components or phases, for example a qualitative part and a mixed part. Those studies were counted as having a 'mixed' design.

social practitioners. The description of their experiences and points of view in these studies forms the basis of our analysis. The participants in the studies included originated from a wide range of countries ( $n = 29$ ) and regions ( $n = 10$ ) in predominantly Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the MENA region. Many studies included participants from various countries of origin, of which the following were each present in more than 10 studies: Afghanistan ( $n = 42$ ), Somalia ( $n = 23$ ), Eritrea ( $n = 12$ ), and Iran ( $n = 11$ ). Fourteen studies did not describe the country of origin of their participants.

In the literature, we identified six major types of relationships that are important during the transition to adulthood of unaccompanied refugee adolescents: those with social workers, educators, family in the country of origin, foster family, friends and broader similar ethnic or cultural communities. These relationships have a supporting or non-supporting influence on key transition challenges that we identified in the literature. Some influence multiple challenges, while others influence just one or a few. While not every included study addresses every possible challenge that unaccompanied adolescents face, we identified four main categories of challenges in the included studies: 'Achieving education and employment' ( $n = 45$  studies); 'Preparing for and living independently' ( $n = 36$ ); 'Building a social network' ( $n = 19$ ); and 'Developing a sense of identity and feelings of belonging' ( $n = 40$ ).

While social relationships are the main focus of this review, some of the studies included ( $n = 8$ ) showed that asylum systems and adolescents' asylum status facilitate or preclude both the transition challenges and the presence of social relationships for unaccompanied adolescents. We therefore begin this section with a discussion of the asylum system as an important contextual factor for the transition to adulthood, before discussing the influence of social relationships on the main challenges of adolescents' transition.

### 3.1. Asylum context

The studies included in this review showed that the transition to adulthood is partly dependent on the asylum status of unaccompanied adolescents and broader legislative or institutional contexts. Asylum policy and asylum status can determine the actors that adolescents come into contact with, and the degree of influence that they might exert on the lives of adolescents in their host country. For example, adolescents might not be assigned a foster family or might not meet non-refugee peers if they have not yet gained a right of residence.

Adolescents often characterise the period between arrival in a host country and the final asylum decision as one of worry, boredom and uncertainty (Allsopp et al., 2015; Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012), which can be experienced as 'living in limbo' (Kohli & Kaukko, 2018; Thommessen, Corcoran, & Todd, 2015). If an asylum application is rejected or youth care is denied, the asylum-seeking adolescent might enter a state of 'social death'. This entails losing feelings of agency and access to many social and other support structures that they had access to as a minor asylum seeker (Elsrud, 2020). In such cases, the preparations for an independent future in the host country, which are described further below, may be replaced with preparations aimed at a future in the country of origin (Wade, 2019). Furthermore, without a right of residence, it is difficult to find a legal job or housing and build self-reliance (Allsopp et al., 2015; Chase, 2020; Fuller & Hayes, 2020). This rejection also negatively impacts the mental and sometimes general health of adolescents and complicates their envisioning of a future (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012). This is especially the case if they are about to turn 18 and lose the right to youth care (Allsopp et al., 2015), which precludes preparing for many of the challenges of the transition to adulthood that are described in this review.

### 3.2. Achieving education and employment

The first transition challenge relates to the aspiration of refugee adolescents to earn an income and support themselves (and others)

financially. Both before and after leaving their country of origin, education is presented as one of the core aspirations of refugee adolescents (and their families) (Oppedal et al., 2017; Vervliet et al., 2015). For adolescents who aspire to support their family or others in their country of origin through a future career, obtaining an education is often a prerequisite to achieving those aspirations (Devenney, 2017). A variety of possible influences and supportive or non-supportive factors were identified in the studies we included. As presented below, family is mostly described as an indirect influence on the educational or professional trajectories of adolescents in their host country. This is in contrast with their lives in their country of origin, where family had the most important direct influence on those pathways (Vervliet et al., 2015). In the host country, other relationships have a direct influence on education and employment, such as relationships with professional carers or educators, or both longer and more recently established informal relationships such as with peers or friends.

#### 3.2.1. Family

Family in the country of origin has a direct influence before adolescents leave their country of origin. According to Vervliet et al. (2015), both education and finding work are among the aspirations that families sometimes explicitly 'assign' to refugee adolescents before their departure. This often occurs in the context of a broader motivation to 'build a better future' for the adolescents themselves or their family. The means to do so include achieving an education or finding a job (Mishra, Winch, et al., 2020; Mishra, Spiegel, et al., 2020; Vervliet et al., 2015), which also enable the adolescent to apply for family reunification or to send remittances back home (Belloni, 2020; Vervliet et al., 2015).

Parental influence is reflected in the educational choices of adolescents in their host country. Multiple studies found that adolescents want to pursue an education because of their parents' aspirations or expectations (Oppedal et al., 2017; Rana et al., 2011; Montgomery et al., 2001; Vervliet et al., 2015) and because an education enables them to realise a career through which they can provide for or reunify with their families (Denov & Bryan, 2014; Devenney, 2017; Miller et al., 2013) or help their communities of origin (Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015). However, these studies did not describe direct contact or deliberation between adolescents and their parents regarding educational choices. Instead, family is presented as an abstract motivator and therefore as an indirect influence, whose hopes and expectations are in the back of adolescents' minds when they pursue an education. This is not to say that direct contact between family abroad and adolescents does not take place, as contact with parents is a source of direct social support for unaccompanied adolescents, as was found in the study by Oppedal and Idsoe (2015).

The desire to provide for their families is not always a supportive factor with respect to the adolescents' educational achievements. Multiple studies give examples of adolescents who prioritise earning an income in the short term above obtaining an education (which might require some time), responding to perceived or imagined pressure or expectations to send back remittances to family in the country of origin (Denov & Bryan, 2010, 2014; Lalander, 2020; Luster et al., 2008; Qin et al., 2015). Oppedal et al. (2017) describe how family may, on the one hand, expect an adolescent to find a job that requires multiple years of higher education, while on the other simultaneously pressuring them to send remittances in the short term. Regardless of the opportunities for or direct contact between adolescents and their relatives abroad, the uncertain circumstances of their family can negatively influence the mental health of adolescents in their host country. For example, several studies found that worry and stress regarding family impacted adolescents' ability to study effectively (Pastoor, 2015; Rana et al., 2011).

A notable exception to the above was presented in the study by Oppedal et al. (2017), who found that family abroad sometimes had a negligible influence on the educational choices of refugee adolescents, even if they maintained contact. The experience and knowledge of parents was considered irrelevant in the context of the adolescents' host

country, and parents were not given a say in practical educational choices.

Sending back remittances may be an indication that family structures are maintained despite the physical divide. Several studies describe how earning money and sending back remittances are related to the adolescent's 'role' within their family, such as being the eldest son (Meloni, 2020; Miller et al., 2013; Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2016). These transfers of resources are facilitated by transnational connections that adolescents maintain with family and friends in both their country of origin and other countries (including transitory ones) (Chase, 2020). However, familial relationships or expectations can change over time, as adolescents may seek to gain greater independence from parents after having paid remittances and lived in the host country for an extended period of time (Eide et al., 2020). This may also alleviate desires for family reunification (Lalander & Herz, 2018). These role-related expectations often translate into non-specific desires, such as pursuing a higher education that leads to a 'good' job (Oppedal et al., 2017), or pursuing professions that are practised in their family (Devenney, 2017; Lalander, 2020). In terms of professional pathways, family is thus presented as an indirect motivator – it provides the incentive to earn an income but does not have an active voice in concrete deliberations or choices about professions.

Familial expectations to remit and earn money may be related to pre-migration circumstances. Families who borrow money in order to pay a people smuggler to take their child abroad, for example, may endure insecure circumstances and pressures until that debt has been repaid. This may act as an additional source of stress for adolescents or further motivation to send remittances (Allsopp & Chase, 2019; Crea et al., 2018), thus increasing their socio-economic vulnerability (Lalander, 2020).

### 3.2.2. Foster family

Foster family in the host country has a predominantly direct influence on the educational achievements of unaccompanied adolescents. This influence may be supportive, with foster parents advocating for appropriate educational resources and support or helping with schoolwork (Rana et al., 2011; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018; Wade, 2019); providing practical and financial support (Rana et al., 2011); and providing an encouraging and stable environment in which to study (Lalander, 2020; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). However, Fuller and Hayes (2020) describe how an unwelcoming foster environment negatively impacts adolescents' educational experiences.

According to several studies, knowledge of the host country's labour market foster families (with or without a refugee background), with a longer residence in the host country, to provide adolescents with advice or guidance in their job search (e.g. Luster et al., 2009). This stands in contrast with the probable knowledge gap of family abroad regarding the labour market in the host country (Oppedal et al., 2017) and the indirect familial influence on an adolescent's development of a vocational identity.

### 3.2.3. Peers and friends

Peers and friends can also play a direct supporting role in the educational achievements of unaccompanied refugees according to the literature included. Peers are described as looking out for one another, helping each other study (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020) or adjust to the circumstances and as providing advice on which educational pathways to follow (Groark et al., 2010; Oppedal et al., 2017; Rana et al., 2011). As an example of solidarity, Denov and Bryan (2010, 2014) describe how older unaccompanied refugees sought employment so that they could support the educational pathways of younger adolescents. Furthermore, friends and peers with a similar background to the adolescent, who have been present for a longer time in a community, can help them overcome information gaps regarding the labour market or help provide the necessary contacts or information to find employment in the host country (Eriksson et al., 2018; Rousseau et al., 1998).

However, the behaviour of peers and friends can also be non-supportive. Multiple studies describe how adolescents felt hindered in their educational development by distractions caused by peers (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012; Omland & Andenas, 2018) or because they were bullied (Otto, 2020; Rana et al., 2011). Peers might also exert an indirect negative influence when adolescents feel that the former are doing better in school, which leads to increased stress (Fuller & Hayes, 2020). Moreover, in Oppedal et al.'s study (2017), the differences in the life experiences of refugee adolescents and their non-refugee counterparts led the former to not discuss their educational pathways with the latter, giving their peers no influence on the matter.

### 3.2.4. Social workers

Social workers and other care professionals have a diverse influence on the educational and professional achievements of refugee adolescents. In terms of supportive behaviour, they are described as advocating for appropriate educational resources and services from schools (Bates et al., 2005; Devenney, 2017, 2020), thus mirroring the above-mentioned supporting role of foster parents. Social workers or carers regularly check in with the educational and care professionals involved with adolescents in order to monitor their educational and more general progress and wellbeing (Daskalaki & Leivaditi, 2018; Omland & Andenas, 2020; Wimelius et al., 2017). Furthermore, as a support network with knowledge of the host country's labour market, as well as contacts in society, carers also support adolescents in finding employment after their graduation (Mishra, Winch, et al., 2020).

Care professionals in refugee accommodation also directly support adolescents' education by providing emotional support and help with schoolwork (Bjernelid et al., 2018; Eriksson et al., 2018; Larkin & Lefevre, 2020; Omland & Andenas, 2018); organising and encouraging adolescents to participate in additional educational activities (Daskalaki & Leivaditi, 2018); or through financial and practical support (Luster et al., 2010). The latter includes descriptions of 'parent-like' actions, such as preparing breakfast or making sure adolescents get to school on time (Eriksson et al., 2018; Mishra, Winch, et al., 2020), or acting as a role model for adolescents who want to study social work (Oppedal et al., 2017). Financial support may take the form of paying tuition fees and other expenses (Luster et al., 2010; Rana et al., 2011). However, the degree of personal involvement in the lives of adolescents differs from carer to carer (Eide et al., 2020; Wimelius et al., 2017).

As a non-supportive factor, several studies mention 'misrecognition' by care workers (Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020), whereby adolescents feel that they were not informed of relevant educational opportunities or pathways (Devenney, 2017; Miller et al., 2013). This may occur in situations where professionals are unaware of, or unwilling to help address, the obstacles that adolescents face in their educational trajectories (Otto, 2020), or when social workers discourage them from pursuing their educational aspirations (Lems, 2020). Staff in charge of adolescent accommodation may also influence their educational achievements, as they do not always take measures against noisy peers or other distractions (Otto, 2020), which can hinder studying at home (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012).

### 3.2.5. Educators

Educators such as teachers and other educational professionals have a self-evident and wide-ranging influence on education and work. In addition to providing an education, teaching the curriculum and explaining possible educational trajectories in the host country (Oppedal et al., 2017), some teachers act as mentors who help adolescents adjust to norms and values in their host society or who promote emotional and educational resilience (Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Pastoor, 2015; Rana et al., 2011).

Conversely, several studies list non-supportive actions by educators that influence adolescents' educational achievements. Biases regarding refugees' capabilities may lead teachers to advise them against pursuing their educational aspirations and settling for a 'lower' level of education

(Lems, 2020; Oppedal et al., 2017), thereby underestimating the educational potential of these adolescents (Lems, 2020). Teachers might also be unable or unwilling to accommodate students' religious needs (Ekström et al., 2020). In other studies, schools were found to be hesitant to take in refugee adolescents at all because they expected these students to have certain educational needs that the school could not meet, for example related to poor language skills (Bates et al., 2005; Crea et al., 2018; Otto, 2020; Rana et al., 2011). Additionally, a school might be unaware of the specific emotional support needs of refugee adolescents (Fuller & Hayes, 2020) or unable to help students overcome negative cultural perceptions of school-based mental health care (Pastoor, 2015).

### 3.3. Preparing for and living independently

In most host countries, the care and accommodation provided to refugee adolescents are revoked once they reach the country's age of adulthood and 'age out of care'. Even with support, this turning point between childhood and adulthood and the changes in status it brings may feel too sudden for young unaccompanied refugee adults (Allsopp et al., 2015). Care systems therefore often seek to equip adolescents with the necessary skills to live independently after ageing out of care. In the studies included, these independent living skills pertain to language; knowledge about the workings of their host society; skills necessary to manage finances and household affairs; the ability to fulfil self-care needs; and the ability to find housing of their own. These skills supplement the knowledge that adolescents acquire during their general education. In terms of the influence of social relationships, few groups are described as having an influence on this entire range of independent living skills.

#### 3.3.1. Family

Family is relatively absent with regard to preparations for independent living, and is not described as having a direct influence. However, in terms of resilience, experiences growing up in their country of origin and adolescents' possible responsibilities in terms of household tasks or caring for siblings are described as preparing them for self-reliance or resilience in the host country (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020; Thommessen, Corcoran, & Todd, 2017). In contrast, being separated from parents is described as making adolescents feel uncertain about the ability to live independently (Van Es et al., 2019). This absence of family and its influence on independent living also extends to adolescents' housing pathways. A notable exception was mentioned in two studies, wherein participants stated that achieving a higher living standard, including a nicer house, would not feel right if their families in the country of origin were not properly cared for, or if familial expectations about helping them were not met (Denov & Bryan, 2010; Herz & Lalander, 2017). In this sense, family again plays a role as an indirect motivator, whose perceived or real circumstances in the country of origin impact the financial choices of adolescents in their host country.

#### 3.3.2. Foster family

Foster family has a direct influence on the independent living abilities of refugee adolescents. As actors who have knowledge of the workings of the host society (and in the case of placements with families from similar ethnic groups, to the society of origin) and who are in extensive contact with unaccompanied adolescents, the foster family is described as supportive in helping them navigate society (Bates et al., 2005; Luster et al., 2009, 2010; Rana et al., 2011) and develop their language skills (Daniel et al., 2020; Luster et al., 2009). In terms of practical skills, Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh (2018) state that allowing adolescents to take part in household activities and recognising their help with hobbies or chores such as gardening helps prepare them for an independent life. In terms of housing, few studies discuss the influence of foster family on adolescents which move into their own place. An exception is the study by Wade (2019), which discusses the foster family's central role in this stage of the transition to adulthood, not only

providing practical or financial support when moving house but also providing or continuing to provide emotional support to the refugee adolescent afterwards.

However, the studies included also show that not all foster families are a fully supportive factor in the acquisition of independent living skills. Language and cultural barriers negatively impact the teaching of necessary skills for adolescents to independently manage household affairs, such as boys being unwilling to learn the 'female' skill of preparing food (Bates et al., 2005). Foster families who do not support adolescents with practicalities (such as setting an alarm clock to wake up on time) might implicitly teach adolescents to take care of themselves but at the cost of making them feel less connected to their foster family (Meloni, 2020). Foster families with a similar migration background might themselves have limited knowledge of the host society or language and might not be able to teach adolescents skills to navigate it (Crea et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2001).

#### 3.3.3. Friends, peers and other informal networks members

Friends, peers and other informal networks members have a wide-ranging influence on refugee adolescents' ability to live independently. Peers who originate from the host society can help them navigate their new surroundings (Groark et al., 2010; Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015; Qin et al., 2015) and acquire language skills (Daniel et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2018; Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Lalander, 2020). For example, Mahieu and Van Caudenberg (2020) describe a co-living experiment in which refugee adolescents and peers from the host country lived together in the same accommodation. This gave the former support in improving language skills, learning about their host country and learning to manage household affairs. Other refugee peers can help new arrivals learn how they should behave in their residence (Omland & Andenas, 2018), provide information and advice about the host society or help new arrivals acquire language skills (Herz, 2019; Mels et al., 2008), while broader migrant communities can help adolescents find good language schools (Rousseau et al., 1998). Peers can also encourage one another to take advice from others and to seek professional or other help when necessary (Qin et al., 2015). They can also support each other financially in some instances (Rousseau et al., 1998). In terms of finding housing, relationships with peers, who have lived in the community for a longer period of time, can help refugees negotiate access to housing once they age out of care (Allsopp et al., 2015; Herz & Lalander, 2017), while communities with a similar migration background can help identify relevant housing opportunities (Rousseau et al., 1998).

In contrast, in Oppedal et al. (2017) study, classmates did not act as cultural brokers. This was because they were a few years younger than the refugee adolescents and were thus seen as less mature. With regard to help-seeking, several authors describe cases where social stigma in the observed peer groups or migrant communities dissuaded adolescents from seeking mental health counselling (Crea et al., 2018; Luster et al., 2010; Majumder, 2019), which might be detrimental to their ability to live independently. In the study by Bjerneld et al. (2018), young adult women were hesitant to move into housing of their own for fear of being stigmatised as 'promiscuous' by their peers.

#### 3.3.4. Social workers

Social workers and other care professionals have a direct influence on adolescents' ability to live independently. Their supporting role stems from their knowledge of the host society, which they convey to refugee adolescents. Both professional and volunteer care structures can help adolescents navigate practical and other aspects of living in the host society (Crea et al., 2018; Daniel et al., 2020; Luster et al., 2010; Söderqvist, 2014; Thommessen, Corcoran, & Todd, 2015; Wimelius et al., 2017). Care workers can also prepare adolescents for living independently by teaching them skills that allow them to take care of themselves. These 'independent living skill classes' include skills such as establishing daily routines, cooking, household work and managing finances (Miller et al., 2013; Rana et al., 2011; Wimelius et al., 2017). In

addition, they can help or encourage adolescents to acquire the necessary language skills to navigate society (Mishra, Winch, et al., 2020; Omland & Andenas, 2018; Wimelius et al., 2017). One exception is reported in a study by Mishra, Winch, et al. (2020), who describe a situation where adolescents were not supported in learning the host country's language due to a lack of language classes in their care facility.

In terms of finding housing, care workers are described as playing a caring or mediating role by explaining ways to find housing once adolescents age out of care (Crea et al., 2018). However, care may also seem stifling to adolescents who feel misrecognised by their carers. One example of this concerned financial instructions, where adolescents were forbidden to send remittances to their families abroad due to being seen as non-agentic 'children' (Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020).

### 3.3.5. Educators

Educators have a direct influence on the acquisition of independent living skills as an extension of the school system's role in preparing students for the future. In the studies included, schools and teachers were found to support the language acquisition of refugee adolescents (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012) and to help them gain knowledge about both the new education system and their broader host society (Crea et al., 2018; Groark et al., 2010; Pastoor, 2015; Wimelius et al., 2017).

## 3.4. Building a social network

Although unaccompanied adolescents arrive in their host country without family members, a range of social relationships have an influence on their transition to adulthood. Some of these relationships, such as with carers, foster families and educators, are appointed to them as part of the country's care system. Others, such as family in the country of origin, are present before an adolescent moves abroad and are maintained afterwards. Still others, such as friends and peers, both with and without a migrant background, are constructed over the course of the adolescents' lives in their host country. Similarly to the above-mentioned challenges of the transition to adulthood, adolescents' social relationships also have a varied influence on their ability and opportunity to form new social relationships in the host country. In the following, we describe how many of the same social relationships, with the notable exception of family in the country of origin, have been found to have a direct impact on an adolescent's ability to construct a social network.

### 3.4.1. Family

Family is conspicuously absent in the literature regarding adolescents' opportunities to form new relationships. According to Rousseau et al. (1998), however, distant relatives in the host country, if present, play a supporting role in building relationships with peers. The support and security that these relatives provide can enable adolescents to focus on interacting with peers. However, in terms of family members who remain in the country of origin, almost none of the studies included describe a direct influence on adolescents' ability to form new relationships. The study by Lalander (2020) is a notable exception, as they describe a situation where the experience of being separated from parents in the country of origin negatively impacted adolescents' ability to form close relationships in the host country.

### 3.4.2. Foster family

Foster family do have a direct influence on the ability of refugee adolescents to form new relationships. They can act as ambassadors and promote adolescents' integration into host communities or help ensure that they have the opportunity to form new friendships (Crea et al., 2018; Luster et al., 2009; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). Moreover, they can teach adolescents what are seen as acceptable forms of communication in the host country (Crea et al., 2018). While adolescents are settling in their host country, foster parents can also build trust by helping to re-establish contact with family in the country of origin (Wade, 2019).

### 3.4.3. Friends and peers

Friends and peers have a direct influence on the construction of new social relationships. Refugee adolescents and peers from a similar ethnic background can expand each other's social networks by bringing each other into contact with possible friends (Mels et al., 2008; Omland & Andenas, 2020). Moreover, peers from the host country may support social relationships by, for example, inviting refugee adolescents to participate in leisure activities (Luster et al., 2010). However, issues such as mistrust by peers regarding the adolescents' background or experiences are detrimental to forming new relationships with these new acquaintances (Denov & Bryan, 2010).

### 3.4.4. Communities and NGOs

Communities and NGOs are described as providing opportunities to meet new people. Youth groups organised by NGOs or religious communities enable friendships by allowing adolescents to mingle with others with a similar background (Chase, 2020; Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012), while activities such as sports events can help bring refugee adolescents into contact with peers from the host country (Pastoor, 2015; Mishra, Winch, et al., 2020). Religious communities can bring adolescents into contact with older generations of people with similar backgrounds (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011) and help form new, sometimes family-like relationships with other community members (Morgan, 2020). However, according to Daniel et al. (2020), forming connections can be difficult, as the older generation might have a different outlook on life than refugees who have arrived more recently and are younger. Furthermore, adolescents might feel constrained in pursuing new romantic relationships with peers from a similar background, if they feel that the norms of their broader ethnic community discourage them (Nordström & Agardh, 2021).

### 3.4.5. Social workers

Social workers and other carers have a wide-ranging influence on the ability of refugee adolescents to form new relationships. Social workers can motivate and support adolescents to form new connections (Omland & Andenas, 2020), utilise their own networks to help adolescents connect to others (Mishra, Winch, et al., 2020) and create opportunities for adolescents to meet new people by organising activities in their residential accommodation (Verdasco, 2020).

Söderqvist (2014) describes how activities and routines established by staff members in care facilities can also lead to isolation or a loss of networks once an adolescent ages out of care if those activities provided them with few opportunities to connect with other people from the host country outside the facility. Feelings of isolation can also occur in care if adolescents are placed in a group home without their friends or other acquaintances (Omland & Andenas, 2020) or when accommodation rules limit the number of visitors that adolescents are allowed to receive (Herz & Lalander, 2017).

### 3.4.6. Educators

Educators are mostly described as having an indirect influence on the ability of refugee adolescents to form new social relationships because school is a setting that in itself helps adolescents meet peers (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012; Montgomery et al., 2001). Teachers themselves may help foster such relationships by offering structure in their lives and acting as a source of support (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012). However, schools can also overlook the specific needs of unaccompanied adolescent refugees, for example in relation to knowledge about intimate relationships (Nordström & Agardh, 2021). The opportunity for new relationships might also be fragmented, as some school systems separate newly arrived refugee adolescents from non-refugee schoolmates and thus hinder contact with peers from the host country (Pastoor, 2015). This lack of contact with non-refugees is a recurring theme in the literature included regarding opportunities for unaccompanied refugee adolescents to build new relationships.



### 3.5. Developing a sense of identity and feelings of belonging

The fourth challenge consists of the formation of identity and development of feelings of belonging. These feelings of belonging can be (or become) multifaceted, directed at both the host country or host society and at their relationships in their country of origin and abroad (Chase, 2020; Söderqvist, 2014). A range of actors have a varied influence on the development of self-perception. The studies included once more represent family as having an indirect but major influence on adolescents' identities, although it is less present in terms of developing a sense of belonging in the host society. Informal networks, with and without a refugee background, can support adolescents in developing both a sense of identity and belonging by allowing them to come into contact with cultural practices from their host country and the continuation of practices from their country of origin. Foster families and professional carers can provide a setting in which adolescents reflect on their past and present experiences and help connect them with their broader host society.

#### 3.5.1. Family

Family is described as one of the major influences on an adolescent's development of identity before they leave their country of origin. Adolescents bring the values they acquired in this pre-migration phase, such as a religious identity, with them to their host country, where corresponding religious or cultural practices embody a sense of belonging or continuity with their family abroad (Denov & Bryan, 2014; Meloni, 2020). Once an adolescent has migrated, this influence can persist. Even if contact with family is not maintained, the morals, values and advice that they received during their upbringing can provide a basis from which they reflect on their experiences, their future and the acquisition of new values in the host country (Bjernerud et al., 2018; Brook & Ottemöller, 2020; Devenney, 2017; Kallio, 2019).

Maintaining contact with family does not always guarantee that its influence on the development of identity will remain significant in the host country. Adolescents might not consider their parents' knowledge, traditions and advice, stemming from their country of origin, as relevant in the context of their host society (Ekström et al., 2020; Oppedal et al., 2017). This includes ideas regarding family structures or dynamics, such as the father being the head of the household, which might be considered irrelevant even after family reunification in the host country (Herz, 2019). Migration and separation from family is also described as an opportunity for adolescents to develop their own sense of identity and future in their host country away from the normative gaze of their family (Meloni, 2020). While family influences adolescents' development of identity, and while identity is closely linked to feelings of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006), the studies included did not identify family in the country of origin as a specific influence on the development of adolescents' feelings of belonging.

#### 3.5.2. Foster family

Foster family is described as having a direct influence on adolescents' perception of self in the host country. In terms of development of identity, the social recognition and support that foster carers provide can help adolescents build the necessary self-esteem to start thinking about a future in the host society (Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). This secure base allows adolescents in foster care to develop their own sense of cultural identity, and may also provide a sense of cultural continuity if they are placed with foster carers with a similar cultural background (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015).

In terms of belonging, foster family is described as an influence on two levels. The first pertains to making adolescents feel welcome or at home in the foster household. Through social recognition, such as by allowing adolescents to help in the household, providing agency in terms of their household activities and pursuing common interests, foster carers help create a sense of security and closeness within the family (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh,

2018; Wade, 2019). By creating this welcoming and trusting environment from the start of the placement, foster carers provide a basis for adolescents to adapt to their new host country (Qin et al., 2015). As a prerequisite, Bates et al. (2005) note that it is important for both refugee adolescents and foster families to discuss their expectations about 'forming a family', as adolescents might still have a family abroad and therefore expect a more professional, mentor-like role from the foster family. Mismatched expectations can lead to feelings of non-belonging, for example if adolescents have to adhere to the house rules of their foster parents after a period of independence during migration (Luster et al., 2009), or if foster parents enforce supposed cultural practices from the adolescent's country of origin that do not match the actual experiences of those adolescents (Ekström et al., 2020).

The second level of influence of foster parents pertains to adolescents' feelings of belonging in the host society. The support given by foster parents can help provide adolescents with positive feelings regarding their position within the host society (Kalverboer et al., 2017). Foster families can also support language acquisition or act as cultural mediators by explaining the workings of the host society (Qin et al., 2015; Söderqvist, 2014). By both providing a secure environment and helping adolescents reach out to the broader community, foster carers aid their integration into society (Crea et al., 2018).

#### 3.5.3. Peers, friends and classmates

Peers, friends and classmates are also described as having a varied influence on the development of identity of refugee adolescents. Meeting new peers in the host country promotes adolescents' self-confidence (Lalander, 2020) or prompts them to reconsider their religious identity (Morgan, 2020). At the same time, other studies describe how fear of rejection by peers leads adolescents to adjust the performance of their identity, for example by hiding their economic or legal circumstances (Allsopp et al., 2015; Lalander, 2020); keeping quiet about their religious beliefs (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011); or being hesitant to ask about or disclose information on certain topics (Brook & Ottemöller, 2020; Thommessen, Corcoran, & Todd, 2017). In this respect, Denov and Bryan (2014) note that the disclosure of feelings and experiences can strengthen the relationship between adolescents and their peers or teachers.

In terms of belonging, these informal networks influence unaccompanied adolescents on two levels. The first is belonging to a peer or friend group. Acts such as the organisation of shared activities in refugee shelters help adolescents form feelings of belonging to a peer group (Verdasco, 2020). However, merely living together in a group home does not necessarily or automatically lead to feelings of belonging to a peer group (of refugees) (Wernesjö, 2015), and being actively excluded by peers increases feelings of non-belonging in a host country (Kauko & Forsberg, 2017; Verdasco, 2020).

Having a friend group in a host society supports the formation of feelings of belonging to the broader country (Allsopp & Chase, 2019; Chase, 2020), which is the second level of influence that peers or friends have. In terms of supportive behaviour, relationships with migrant peers or peers from the host country, with more experience in the host country, can support initial feelings of belonging by explaining the host society and how to behave in it (Groark et al., 2010; Herz, 2019; Luster et al., 2010; Qin et al., 2015). Peers from the host country, in particular, can act as gatekeepers and assist refugee adolescents to establish a sense of normalcy in the host society by helping them acquire language skills and connecting them to a broader social network (Eriksson et al., 2018; Lalander & Herz, 2018; Söderqvist, 2014). A prerequisite for this creation of feelings of belonging is that the broader host society also has a willingness to connect with refugee adolescents and not just the host society adolescents themselves (Daniel et al., 2020).

#### 3.5.4. Communities

Communities, both with and without a migration background, impact the development of identity and feelings of belonging of refugee

adolescents in similar ways to other informal networks. Chase (2020) identifies notions of ‘community’ as one of the factors that influence adolescents’ performance of identity and the creation of feelings of belonging to both old and new communities. Communities with a similar ethnic background to the adolescent can also help them integrate faster once they arrive in their host country if they provide both continuity with their country of origin and possibilities to connect with the broader host society (Crea et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2001). This continuity might be of particular importance, as adolescents can experience feelings of loss with regard to their community of origin upon arrival in the host country (Groark et al., 2010). However, the presence of both familiar and unfamiliar communities in the host country also limits adolescents’ feelings of agency in expressing their identity, as the ‘invisible gaze’ of the community can prompt them to behave in accordance with the perceived or experienced norms and values of those communities (Ekström et al., 2020).

### 3.5.5. Social workers

Social workers and other carers have a direct influence on the development of identity and feelings of belonging of unaccompanied adolescents in a similar manner to foster families. In terms of integration into and belonging in the host country, care workers can explain various aspects of society, such as the language or bureaucracy and how to behave in or connect with society (Daniel et al., 2020; Omland & Andenas, 2018; Söderqvist, 2014). Furthermore, they can help foster feelings of belonging to social groups and provide opportunities or activities for adolescents to connect to social networks in both their refugee accommodation (Verdasco, 2020) and the broader host society (Kohli, 2006). However, negative interactions with carers can foster feelings of non-belonging in the host country. Examples include not allowing adolescents to have a say in decisions regarding them (Kauko & Forsberg, 2017), and the abrupt ending of relationships once adolescents age out of care (Wernesjö, 2015; Wimelius et al., 2017).

Care organisations can provide a safe or supportive environment for adolescents while they adjust to their new surroundings (Kauko & Wernesjö, 2017; Luster et al., 2010). Examples include giving them the social recognition necessary to develop their own identity (Kallio, 2019), for example by allowing them to participate in decisions regarding themselves (Kauko & Wernesjö, 2017; Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012) or by establishing a family-like relationship (Kauko & Forsberg, 2017; Kohli, 2006). However, Omland and Andenas (2020) found that different carers can have different and possibly incongruous views on the personality and needs of individual adolescents. For example, views on refugee adolescents as ‘vulnerable’ (in some areas) often coincide with views of them being ‘independent’ or ‘adult’ (in other areas). Both carers and the adolescent themselves may have these perceptions (Kauko & Wernesjö, 2017). If those needs or the self-perception of adolescents are not recognised, adolescents can feel unable to express their identity (Otto, 2020), feel mistrusted by carers (Otto, 2020), or withdraw from care altogether (Devenney, 2020; Meloni, 2020).

### 3.5.6. Educators

Educators play a similar direct role to care workers in the formation of identities and feelings of belonging. In terms of self-confidence, being recognised by teachers as knowledgeable can support adolescents in pursuing the future they envision for themselves (Lalander, 2020). In terms of belonging, educators are also able to explain the workings of the host society to unaccompanied adolescents and teach them how to become ‘citizens’ (Pastoor, 2015). However, some studies describe how teachers can both support and hinder an adolescent’s development of identity or their integration into broader society, for example through reinforcing exclusionary societal policies, discourses or practices (Ekström et al., 2020; Lems, 2020).

## 4. Conceptualising the transition to adulthood

In the results section, we discussed the transition to adulthood of unaccompanied refugee adolescents in their host country, with a focus on their social relationships. In doing so, we identified four significant challenges in this transition, that can be influenced by social relations. We thereby also identified the legislative or institutional context of the asylum system as a conditional factor in the construction of these social relationships and related challenges. Building on these four categories of challenges in the studies included, we argue that two core outcomes of adulthood emerged from our data: ‘Building self-reliance’ and ‘Finding a place in society’. Fig. 2 presents the links between relationships, their influence on challenges and subsequent outcomes in adulthood.

Self-reliance is the first outcome of the transition to adulthood that is influenced by the social relationships of unaccompanied adolescents. As discussed in relation to the challenge of ‘Achieving education and employment’, social relationships have an impact on the choices and opportunities for the acquisition of qualifications to build a career, achieve financial independence in the host country and possibly fulfil familial expectations of remittances. Through ‘Preparing for and living independently’, refugee adolescents acquire the skills necessary to stand on their own feet after reaching the age of adulthood and losing the right to youth care, gaining independence from the care structures that they were assigned as children. Social or socio-cultural support during and after facing these two challenges can be achieved by successfully facing the challenges of ‘Building a social network’ and/or ‘Developing a sense of identity and belonging’.

In addition to the more practically or financially oriented capacity for self-reliance, our results also showed that ‘Finding a place in society’ is an important outcome on the path to adulthood in the contexts discussed by the studies included in this review. To address the challenge of ‘Building a social network’, adolescents can be facilitated in the maintenance of pre-migration relationships or the construction of a new network in the host country. School or work, in the challenge of ‘Achieving education and employment’, can also provide opportunities to form new social relationships. This social network, in turn, also influences the outcomes of the challenge of ‘Developing a sense of identity and feelings of belonging’, where the formation of adolescents’ own identities and the presence of a social network impacts their feelings of belonging or not in the host society.

## 5. Discussion

This systematic review identified the supportive and non-supportive influence of social relationships on the four main challenges that unaccompanied refugee adolescents face during their transition to adulthood. It thereby emphasised the importance of the *microsystem*, the interactions with people in adolescents’ immediate environment (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) during this transition. The people that adolescents most closely interact with are also those who directly identify and influence adolescents’ success in overcoming the transition challenges that we presented in this review. It is important to note here that most of the studies included were conducted in countries that have signed the 1951 and 1967 Refugee Convention and Protocol and have implemented an extensive asylum and integration system, including formalised care and protections for unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents. Adolescents in countries without these arrangements might not have the same degree of support or opportunities arising from professional care networks, for example in cases where guardianship or care is arranged in an informal, ad-hoc manner inside or outside of refugee camps (e.g. Shepler, 2010). Furthermore, many of the studies included focused predominantly on boys, if a distinction between the participants’ genders was described at all. This gendered context reflects reality, as most unaccompanied refugee adolescents are boys, but one must keep in mind that the transition to adulthood might present different challenges to adolescents of different genders.

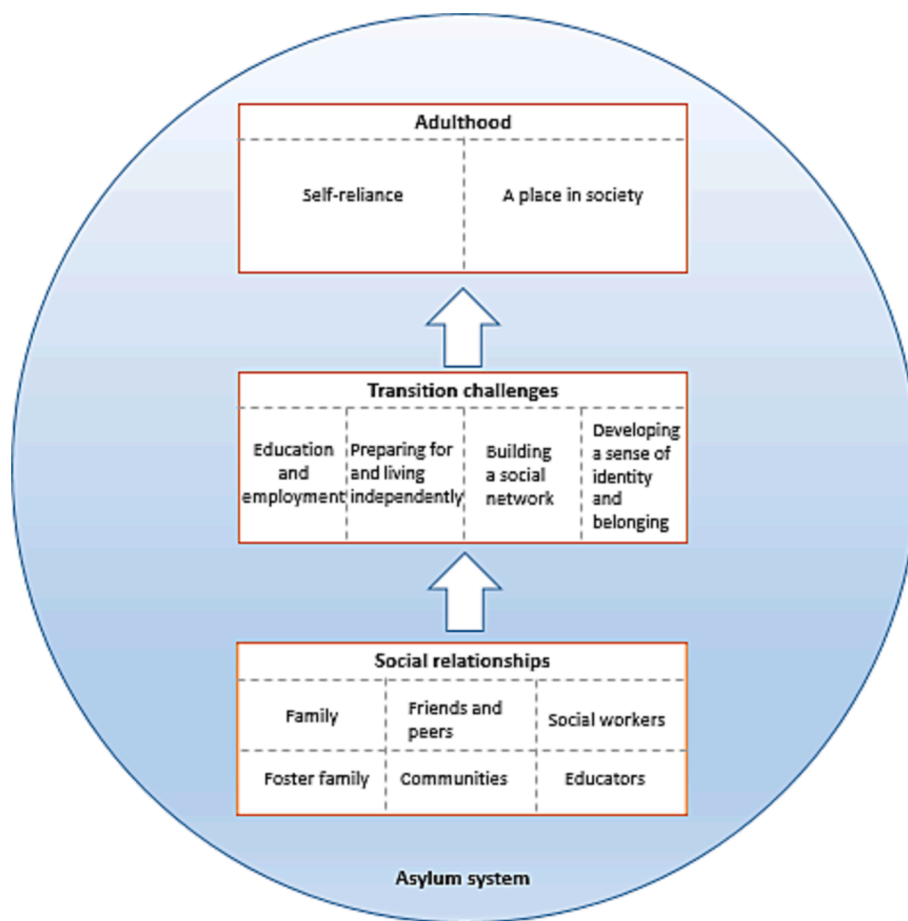


Fig. 2. The Influence of Social Relationships on Adulthood through Transition Challenges.

The groups of relationships that we identified for unaccompanied refugee adolescents are similar to those that play a role among their non-refugee counterparts in out-of-home care. One notable difference is the separation from and physical absence of family, as well as uncertain circumstances in the country of origin, which constitute additional sources of stress and worry for unaccompanied adolescents (Pastoor, 2015; Rana et al., 2011). While transnational contact was mentioned in some studies, family in the country of origin was often described as an indirect influence compared with other social relationships. Pre-migration, the family constitutes a direct and major influence in shaping adolescents' aspirations or ideas about the future (Vervliet et al., 2015). However, the family's post-migration role in the transition appears to be that of an indirect influence. Their pre-migration expectations of adolescents' familial roles or influence can, for example, motivate an adolescent to pursue a specific professional pathway or continue certain cultural practices, but family does not have a direct say in the choices that adolescents make during their transition. In terms of the ability or opportunity to form new social relationships, family is mostly described as absent. This stands in contrast with studies that describe relatively common occurrences of sustained, direct transnational contact between unaccompanied adolescents and their families (e.g. Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015; Pérez & Salgado, 2019). Nevertheless, although indirect, the influence of transnational family shows that the adolescents' transition to adulthood does occur within a transnational social field and that transnational ties can be maintained while adolescents adjust to their host country (cf. Levitt & Schiller, 2004).

Social relationships influence the four main challenges faced by unaccompanied refugee adolescents during their transition to adulthood that we identified in this review: 'Obtaining education and employment', 'Preparations for and living independently', 'Building a social

network' and 'Developing a sense of identity and feelings of belonging'. These challenges faced by refugee adolescents broadly correspond with models of the challenges faced by non-refugee care leavers during their transition to adulthood, although not completely similar. While Geenen and Powers (2007) described challenges such as 'self-determination', 'independent living skills' and the importance of relationships and family for care leavers (Geenen & Powers, 2007), issues of identity and belonging were not present in their model. Identity, belonging and social relationships are also infrequently described in more general social or psychological models of the transition to adulthood of non-care-leaving adolescents. These models often focus on markers such as employment, education, starting a new family or no longer living with parents (the latter being a given for unaccompanied refugees) (e.g. Arnett, 2001; Eliason et al., 2015). Neither are these included in studies that focus on the cognitive development of adolescents in general (e.g. Lenz, 2001).

While some studies do address culture or belonging in transition models (e.g. Spanjaard & Slot, 2015), developing identity and belonging appears to be a particular challenge for refugee adolescents (Varvin et al., 2022). One explanation could lie in the *macrosystem* – the overarching socio-cultural context in which the transition takes place (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Reconciling the socio-cultural context of both a host country and a country of origin while processing the separation and migration from the latter and developing an identity and belonging in either or both, is a challenge that distinguishes refugee adolescents from peers who transition to adulthood within a single context.

The preparation for and accumulation of economic capital and what we described as the outcome 'building self-reliance' in the literature, fits within a general 'Western' perspective on adulthood. This perspective often correlates with individual self-reliance, which is determined through achievements such as finding housing, obtaining an education

and gaining financial and personal independence (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018). This is reflected in the yield from our literature search, which predominantly consisted of literature focusing on Western European and North-American host countries. The importance of individual responsibility and 'adulthood' could therefore be viewed in light of a broader neoliberal asylum or welfare policy trend in 'Western' societies, which often focuses on individual financial and personal independence and non-reliance on welfare systems as markers of a desirable refugee policy (Kymlicka, 2015). The studies in this review described adolescents who were expected or pressured to work towards these 'Western' goals in the context of their respective asylum systems. This individualistic notion of adulthood might not be generalisable to other societies, including refugee adolescents' countries of origin, where the transition to adulthood might entail different challenges or foci (Montgomery, 2009).

The second transition outcome, 'Finding a place in society', emphasises the importance of adolescents' social networks and cultural capital during their transition to adulthood. As our review has shown, both professional networks, such as social workers and educators, and non-professional or informal networks, such as foster families and peers, can influence an adolescent's transition. This accords with previous research which showed that the characteristics of adolescents' social networks can shape the outcomes of their transition to adulthood (Blakeslee, 2012). The influence of particular groups of actors differs across the transition challenges. Carers, for example, have been described as exerting a direct influence on every transition challenge, while actors such as communities are most often described in relation to building a social network or developing a sense of identity and belonging.

### 5.1. Strengths and limitations

One strength of this study is that the transition to adulthood of unaccompanied refugee adolescents was placed in a social and transnational context. By systematically reviewing the transition through the influence of adolescents' social networks, we have both been able to identify key transition challenges and describe the range of supportive or non-supportive influences of multiple social actors.

One of this review's limitations is its focus on English-language publications. This greater focus on 'Western' studies might have led to a more Western-centric, individualistic model of the transition to adulthood within a formal asylum and care context. Studies in a different context might present different challenges or focus points. Peer-reviewed publications aimed at national, non-English-language policy, or those aimed at practitioners, might have been written in the native languages of those countries. Having said this, the transition described in the articles included leads adolescents to an independent life in their Western host society. This Western perspective is therefore relevant.

Another limitation is that this review described the possible influences of various groups of actors, but did not compare their impacts, as the most of the studies included did not make this comparison either. As such, we have described which actors are perceived as supportive or non-supportive by adolescents, but we cannot identify which actors are generally seen as the *most* or the *least* supportive in relation to each transition challenge.

### 5.2. Implications for further research

In understanding the challenges that adolescents face during their

transition to adulthood, it is important to maintain a holistic view of their social networks. Both informal and professional relationships can have a supportive or non-supportive influence on transitioning adolescents. These relationships can also complement or contradict one another. While research has been done on both the influence of social relationships on the transition to adulthood and the challenges that transitioning refugee adolescents face, transnational family ties are less present in this context. That transnational family contact can take place has been described before (e.g. Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015; Pérez & Salgado, 2019), but little is known about the ways in which those family ties are experienced, whether a 'transnational family life' can be formed (cf. Bryceson, 2019), or whether this contact directly influences the choices made and challenges faced by unaccompanied adolescents in their host countries. Researching this phenomenon could also be an opportunity to compare the influence or impact of family in relation to the other actors in adolescents' social networks, which was beyond the scope of this systematic review.

Furthermore, the life course of refugees takes place within broader, national and international legislative contexts. This governmentality of immigration and the degree of 'openness' of society can have profound impacts on the freedom of movement, independence or belonging of refugees within a state (Fassin, 2011a). As political stances on immigration can change over time, the outcome of and the context in which the transition to adulthood of refugee adolescents takes places also change with it. It is thereby also important to consider the individual characteristics of refugee adolescents, as individual or certain groups of migrants can in particular cases be treated in a divergent manner from what is conveyed in the general asylum discourse. For example, discretionary 'humanitarian reasons' (cf. Fassin, 2011b) can lead to the approval of asylum applications of refugees 'most in need', while denying those of peer nationals. Similarly, gender-based notions of 'threats' might implicitly limit the degree of freedom of action for male refugees by comparison to their female counterparts (Herz, 2019), and the migration or asylum experiences of adolescent girls might differ from those of boys (Bjerneld et al., 2018). Further research is therefore recommended on the influence of transnational ties and national discourse or policy, including an intersectional lens, on the transition to adulthood of unaccompanied refugee adolescents.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Kjell Winkens:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Elianne Zijlstra:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Wendy Post:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Carla van Os:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Monika Smit:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Appendix 1. Overview of included studies and their characteristics

Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
Allsopp et al. (2015)	United Kingdom	$N = ?^a$ , age 18–24	Burundi and Somalia, among others.	Qualitative: Critical policy analysis, Interviews, and participant observation.	Young people's lived experiences of constructing futures while subject to immigration control as they transit to adulthood.	Independent living Sense of identity and belonging Asylum system	Friends, peers and other informal networks
Allsopp and Chase (2019)	United Kingdom and Italy	$N = 100+$ (8F in the UK, ?M), ?, ?	A range of countries.	Qualitative: Critical discourse analysis of policy documents and legislation, semi-structured interviews.	Tensions between policy and lived experiences of youths (regarding 'best interests', 'durable solutions', and 'belonging') as they become adults in the EU.	Education and employment Independent living	Family Friends, peers, and other informal networks
Bates et al. (2005)	United States	Surveys: $N = 43$ (38M, 5F), ?, ? Interviews: $N = 33$ (28M, 5F), ?, ? Care workers and foster families were also included.	Sudan.	Mixed: Surveys, focus groups and interviews.	Resettlement experiences of youth placed in foster care.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family Social workers
Belloni (2020)	Eritrea	$N = 7$ , no further demographic information. Families and relations of participants were also included.	Eritrea.	Qualitative: Multi-sited ethnography and participant observation.	Ideas about growing up in a protracted crisis, the dynamics of youth emigration, and the (lack) of interactions with family regarding youth's migration trajectories.	Education and employment	Family
Bjerneld et al. (2018)	Sweden	$N = 12$ (12F), 23–42, 6–23 years.	Somalia.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews.	Experiences of Somali women transitioning into Swedish society (as unaccompanied refugee children and beyond).	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Community Social workers
Brook and Ottemöller (2020)	Norway	$N = 6$ (6F), 6 months-5 years.	Eastern and Central African countries.	Qualitative: Narrative interviews,	The adaptation experiences of unaccompanied refugee girls.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Peers or friends
Chase (2020)	United Kingdom	$N = 31$ (? M/F), 17–25, ?	Afghanistan.	Qualitative: Ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, arts-based methods.	The link between fulfilling young adults' capabilities and their sense of wellbeing.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging Asylum system	Family Friends Communities and NGOs
Crea et al. (2018)	United States	$N = 79$ Care workers, healthcare workers, educational professionals, legal professionals, foster parents.		Qualitative: Focus groups.	Needs and best practices for unaccompanied children in care.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Family Foster family Friends, peers, and other informal networks Communities Social workers Educators
Daniel et al. (2020)	Norway	$N = 21$ $n = 13$ [UAM] (? M/F) <sup>b</sup> , 16–18, ? $n = 8$ [Young adults] (? M/F), 18+, ?	Eritrea and Afghanistan.	Qualitative: Focus group discussions with semi-structured interviews.	Intergenerational perspectives on challenges and resources associated with adaptation to a life in the host country.	Independent living Building a social network	Foster family Friends, peers and other informal networks

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
Daskalaki and Leivaditi (2018)	Greece	Parents of accompanied minors were also included. $N = 20-22$ (between 20 and 22M), 12–18, $M = 10$ .	Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Morocco, Somalia, and Ghana.	Qualitative: Ethnographic field research, child-centered methods, narratives, life histories, informal discussions, classroom interactions, language portraits, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and diaries.	Youths' educational engagements within their temporary accommodation.	Sense of identity and belonging Education and employment	Communities and NGOs Social workers Social workers
Denov and Bryan (2010)	Canada	$N = 16$ (14M, 2F), 16–30, ?	Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Sudan.	Qualitative: Interviews.	Challenges of unaccompanied children regarding flight and resettlement.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network	Family Peers or friends
Denov and Bryan (2014)	Canada	$N = 17$ (14M, 3F), 16–18+, ?	Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Sudan.	Qualitative: Interviews and focus groups.	The influence of language and discourse influence the experiences and resettlement of separated refugee children.	Education and employment Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Family Peers or friends Teachers
Devenney (2017)	United Kingdom	$N = 18$ (15M, 3F), 17–23, ?	Afghanistan, Eritrea, various other countries.	Qualitative: Interviews using visual methods.	Unaccompanied children's biographic narratives of their past, present, and future as they prepare to leave care.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging	Family Social workers
Devenney (2020)	United Kingdom	$N = 18$ (? M/F), 17–28, ? Care professionals were also interviewed.	Various countries.	Mixed: Social circle diagrams and interviews.	Care professionals fulfilling a role as 'co-navigators' that assist young people in an uncertain social terrain, and immigration uncertainty.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging	Social workers
Eide et al. (2020)	Norway	$N = 9$ (9M), 15–19, ?	Afghanistan.	Qualitative: Ethnographic interviews.	Changes in ambivalence and trust in youths' relationships with family, peers, and social workers.	Education and employment	Family Social workers
Ekström et al. (2020)	Sweden	$N = 11$ (11F), 13–18, 1–3 years.	Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews.	Identity negotiations when migrating to a country with different religious ideals.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging	Family Foster family Communities Educators
Elsrud (2020)	Sweden & Italy	$N = 12$ (12M), ?, ?	?	Qualitative: Interviews and participant observation.	Re-migration after an asylum rejection because of experiences of 'social death'.	Asylum system	Social workers
Eriksson et al. (2018)	Sweden	$N = 11$ (8M/3F), under 21 ( $n = 6$ ) and over 21 ( $n = 5$ ), 2–6 years	Five different countries, the majority from Afghanistan.	Qualitative: Grounded-theory situational analysis, based on in-depth interviews	The significance of social networks for becoming established in a new country.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging	Peers or friends Social workers
Fuller and Hayes (2020)	United Kingdom	$N = 6$ (5M, 1F), 18–19, ?	Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iran.	Qualitative: Interpretational phenomenological analysis.	Experiences of education and support for young refugees.	Education and employment Independent living Asylum system	Foster family Peers or friends Educators

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
Groark et al. (2010)	United Kingdom	N = 6 (4M, 2F), 16–18, 6 months-1 year	Countries in Africa and Asia.	Qualitative: Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Experiences and emotional needs of unaccompanied children in their host country.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Peers or friends Communities Educators
Herz and Lalander (2017)	Sweden	N = 23 (?M, ?F), 15–25, ?	Mainly Afghanistan and Somalia.	Qualitative: Interviews and ethnographic observations.	Experiences of 'loneliness' and ascribed identities for unaccompanied refugee children.	Independent living Building a social network	Family Friends, peers and other informal networks Social workers
Herz and Lalander (2019)	Sweden	N = 20 (?M, ?F), 15–25, ?	Mainly Afghanistan and Somalia.	Qualitative: Interviews and observations.	How unaccompanied children experience their social workers in the context of their daily lives.	Independent living	Friends, peers and other informal networks
Herz (2019)	Sweden	N = 20 (20M), 15–22, 6 months-5 years	Afghanistan, Somalia and various other countries.	Qualitative: Ethnographic observations and interviews	Reflections of young men on masculinity and gender during a societal debate about the possible 'threat' of young migrants.	Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Friends, peers and other informal networks
Kallio (2019)	England and Finland	N = 1 (1M), ?, ? Young men and families were also interviewed.	Afghanistan.	Qualitative: In-depth interviews.	The impact of familial agency on the political and personal agency of refugees.	Sense of identity and belonging	Family Social workers
Kalverboer et al. (2017)	The Netherlands	N = 132 (94M/38F), 13–23, ?	Afghanistan, Somalia, Guinea, Angola, Sierra Leone, China, and 23 other countries.	Mixed: Interviews, BIC-Q questionnaire.	Minors' views on wellbeing, living circumstances, and place in host society, compared between different types of care facilities.	Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family
Kaukko and Wernesjö (2017)	Finland and Sweden	Study 1: N = 12 (12F), 8–17, ? Study 2: N = 11 (9M, 2F), 16–19, ?	?	Study 1: Qualitative – Participatory action research and semi-structured, thematic interviews. Study 2: Qualitative – Semi-structured, thematic interviews.	Children's participation and sense of belonging, in relation to fluid performances of childhood versus adulthood and independence versus being cared for in care.	Sense of identity and belonging	Social workers
Kauko and Forsberg (2017)	Finland	N = 12 (8M, 4F), 15–17, 4 years on avg.	Countries in Africa and Asia.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews and observations.	Housing pathways and senses of home and belonging of unaccompanied children.	Sense of identity and belonging	Peers, friends and classmates Social workers
Kohli and Kaukko (2018)	Finland	N = 12 (12F), 8–17, ?	Somalia, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo.	Qualitative: Participatory action research, interviews, observations.	The construction of everyday lives while waiting for asylum outcomes for asylum-seeking girls in residential care.	Asylum system	Social workers
Kohli (2006)	United Kingdom	Social workers (N = 29)		Qualitative: Interviews.	Care workers' engagements with young people's past, present, and future worlds and their impact on resettlement.	Sense of identity and belonging	Social workers
Korkiamäki and Gilligan (2020)	Finland	N = 18 (18M), 15–17, 10–37 months.	Afghanistan, Iran, and a Northern African country.	Qualitative: Ecomaps and photo-elicited interviews.	Various responses to social misrecognition and the construction of agentic identities for refugee youths.	Education and employment	Social workers
Lalander and Herz (2018)	Sweden	N = 23 (20M/3F), 15–22, 6 months-5 years	Primarily Afghanistan and Somalia, also Ethiopia, Iran, Syria, and Pakistan.	Qualitative, long-term: Interviews, informal conversations, and ethnographic observations	Influence of parents regarding the decision to flee, the rationality of the escape plan, and possible future family reunions.	Education and employment	Family
Lalander (2020)	Sweden	N = 20 (17M, 3F), 15–22, 1–5 years.	Afghanistan, Somalia, Ethiopia,	Qualitative: Interviews and observations.	Habitus and the everyday lives and life plans during the transition to adulthood of young refugees.	Education and employment Independent	Family Foster family Friends, peers and other

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
			Pakistan, Iran, and Syria.			living Sense of identity and belonging	informal networks Educators
Larkin and Lefevre (2020)	United Kingdom	N = 3 (3F), 14–21, >6 months. Social workers were also interviewed.	?	Qualitative: Unstructured, creative interviews.	Meaning-making during social work practice.	Education and employment	Social workers
Lems (2020)	Switzerland	N = 8 (6M, 2F) plus 60 additional 'loosely followed' children, ?, ?	Eritrea, Guinea and Somalia.	Qualitative: Ethnographic fieldwork	Negotiations and sense-making of important social markers by unaccompanied youth and their teachers in an integration class.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging	Social workers Educators
Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012)	Sweden	N = 26 (26M), 13–17, 6–11 months.	Afghanistan and Iraq.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews, participative methods.	Needs and support of children during and after the asylum process.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging Asylum system	Peers or friends Communities and NGOs Social workers Educators
Luster et al. (2008)	United States	N = 10 (10M), 25.8 on avg., ?	Sudan.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups.	Experiences with ambiguous loss, search for family and (re)establishing relationships.	Education and employment	Family
Luster et al. (2009)	United States	N = 18 (16M, 2F), 18–26, 7 years. Foster families were also interviewed.	Sudan.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews.	Experiences of living in foster families (including changing between foster families) after having lived in peer groups in refugee camps.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family
Luster et al. (2010)	United States	N = 19 (17M, 2F), 18–26, ? Foster parents were also interviewed.	Sudan.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews.	Factors that contribute to a successful adaptation.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family Social workers Peers and friends
Mahieu and Van Caudenberg (2020)	Belgium	N = 23 (? M/F), 17–23, ?. Buddies were also interviewed.	?	Qualitative: Semi-structured in-depth interviews, Informal conversations, Observations.	Evaluation of a co-habitation project aimed at promoting the integration of unaccompanied refugees.	Independent living	Friends, peers and other informal networks
Majumder (2019)	United Kingdom	N = 16 (14M, 2F) 15–18, ?	Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Somalia.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews	General perceptions and beliefs of children with regards to experiences with mental health services.	Independent living	Friends, peers and other informal networks
Meloni (2020)	United Kingdom	Fieldwork: N = 57 (? M/F), 17–25, ?	Afghanistan, Eritrea, Albania.	Qualitative: Biographical interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, visual means.	The migration experience of unaccompanied in terms of loneliness, freedom, and competing moral frameworks.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Foster family Social workers

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
Mels et al. (2008)	Belgium	N = 12 (12M), 15–18, 73–745 days.	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Burundi, Mongolia, Syria, Albania, Tibet, and Iraq.	Mixed: Social circle diagrams and semi- structured interviews.	Sources and importance of social support for unaccompanied refugees.	Independent living Building a social network	Friends, peers and other informal networks
Miller et al. (2013)	Australia	N = 17 (17M), 14–18, 3 weeks – 12 months. Carers were also interviewed.	Afghanistan.	Qualitative: Field observations and semi- structured interviews.	Caring for refugee youths in relation to their best interests during their transition to life in their host country.	Education and employment Independent living	Family Social workers
Mishra, Winch, et al. (2020)	Greece	N = 44 (44M), 18–21, ?	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran.	Qualitative: Semi- structured life history calendars and interviews.	How interactions with child protection staff shapes the future trajectories of child migrants.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network	Family Communities and NGOs Social workers
Mishra, Spiegel, et al. (2020)	Greece	N = 44 (44M), 18+, arrived before turning 18. Child protection staff was also interviewed	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran.	Qualitative: In-depth interviews and life histories.	Interpretations of (age- related) vulnerability by child protection staff and cumulative disadvantage of unaccompanied youths.	Education and employment	Family
Montgomery et al. (2001)	Canada	Social Practitioners, N = 18		Qualitative: Semi- structured interviews	The profile and migration trajectory of unaccompanied minors, and special intervention issues.	Education and employment	Family
Morgan (2020)	Sweden	N = 6 (6M), 17–32, 1–4 years.	Afghanistan, Iran.	Qualitative: Participant observation, interviews.	Agency and belonging in relation to religious conversion in the host country.	Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Peers, friends and classmates Communities and NGOs
Nardone and Correa-Velez (2016)	Australia	N = 17 (17M), 16 on avg., 2 years on avg.	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran.	Qualitative: Semi- structured peer interviews.	Conceptual challenges of refugee journeys.	Education and employment	Family
Ní Raghallaigh (2011)	Ireland	N = 32 (18M, 14F), 14–18, ?	Eastern Africa, Western Africa, other parts of Africa, Western Asia, and Eastern Europe.	Qualitative: Semi- structured interviews	Religious coping in relation to the challenges that young refugees face.	Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Communities and NGOs Peers, friends and classmates
Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh (2015)	England & Ireland	Study A: Census profile: N = 2113 Case study: N = 21 (21M), 13–18, 10 months – 5 years Focus groups: N = 19 (? M/F), 15–19, ?. Care workers and foster parents were also included Study B: N = 21 (13M/8F), 11–19, 6 + months. N = 8 (8M), 18–22, 1–5 years.	Study A: Afghanistan and 6 other countries. Study B: Nigeria, Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, Central Asia, and Southern Africa..	Study A: Mixed methods: Census profiles, postal survey, case studies, and focus groups. Study B: Qualitative: Interviews.	The influence of (cross-) cultural foster matches on the cultural and identity development needs of children.	Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family
Nordström and Agardh (2021)	Sweden	N = 8 (8M), 18–22, 1–5 years.	Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen.	Qualitative: Interviews.	Male refugee minors’ perceptions of relationships and information about sexual health.	Building a social network	Communities and NGOs Educators
Omland and Andenas (2018)	Norway	N = 18 (18M), 10–16, 3–14 months.	Afghanistan.	Qualitative: (Life mode) interviews.	Developmental projects of refugee boys as they move towards adulthood.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of	Peers or friends Social workers

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
Omland and Andenas (2020)	Norway	$N = 15$ (11M, 4F), 13–16, 10–19 months. Caregivers were also interviewed.	Afghanistan, Somalia, Angola, and Sri Lanka.	Qualitative: Interviews	The ways in which young refugees re-establish their social lives in a way that facilitates a sense of togetherness in their everyday lives during resettlement, without access to their own families.	identity and belonging Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Friends and peers Social workers
Omland and Andenas (2020)	Norway	$N = 15$ (11M, 4F), 13–16, ? Caregivers were also included.	Afghanistan, Somalia, Angola, and Sri Lanka.	Qualitative: Interviews.	The influence of delegation or outsourcing of care for unaccompanied children on their development and wellbeing.	Education and employment	Social workers
Oppedal and Idsoe (2015)	Norway	$N = 895$ (appr. 737M, 158F), $M = 18.6$ , $M = 3.5$ years.	Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and more than 30 other countries.	Quantitative: Questionnaires.	The impact of social support from family abroad and friends on acculturation, discrimination and mental health.	Education and employment	Family
Oppedal et al. (2017)	Norway	Survey: $N = 918$ (82.1 %M), $M = 18.6$ , $M = 3.42$ . Interviews: $N = 30$ (86.7 %M), $M = 20.15$ , $M = 4.30$ .	Survey: Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and 30 other nationalities. Interviews: Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Iraq, and 4 other countries.	Mixed: Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews.	Educational aspirations and vocational identity formation among unaccompanied refugees.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Foster family Peers or friends Social workers Educators
Otto (2020)	Malta	$N = 65$ (? M/F), 48 legally minors, 17 legally adults, ?	Somalia, (and others?).	Qualitative: Participant observation, narrative interviews.	Negotiations of child interests in a care facility, and contestations of labels of 'childhood' and 'adulthood'.	Education and employment Sense of identity and belonging	Peers or friends Social workers Educators
Pastoor (2015)	Norway	$N = 40$ (32M, 8F), 16–23, ?	Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Chechnya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.	Qualitative: Interviews and observations	The role of schools in supporting psychosocial transitions concerning processes of socialisation, integration, and rehabilitation upon resettlement.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Family Communities and NGOs Educators
Qin et al. (2015)	United States	$N = 19$ (17M, 2F), 18–26, ?	Sudan.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews.	Negotiations of cultural identity for refugees who grow up in a different country than their country of origin.	Education and employment Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Friends, peers and other informal networks Foster family
Rana et al. (2011)	United States	$N = 39$ : $n = 19$ adolescents (17M, 2F) 18–26, ? (mean age at resettlement = 15 years) $n = 20$ foster parents	Sudan.	Qualitative: open-ended semi-structured interviews.	Factors associated with educational resilience among Sudanese refugee youth who experienced trauma prior to foster family placement.	Education and employment Independent living	Family Foster family Peers or friends Social workers Educators
Rousseau et al. (1998)	Canada	$N = 10$ (10M), 13–18, ? Key community informants and care workers were also interviewed.	Somalia.	Qualitative: Unstructured and semi-structured interviews.	The influence of a like-ethnic community and peer-group on the resilience of young refugees.	Education and employment Independent living Building a	Family Peers or friends

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh (2018)	England and Ireland	Study 1: $N = 2113$ [Census data], $N = 21$ [Interviews] (21M), 13–18, 10 months–5 years $N = 19$ [Focus groups] (? M/F), 15–20, ? Study 2: $N = 21$ (13M/8F), 11–19, 6 months–7 years. Additional interviews/surveys with foster parents and care workers.	Study 1: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, Vietnam and a West African country. Study 2: Nigeria, and countries in Eastern and Middle Africa, Central Asia and Southern Asia.	Study 1: Mixed methods: Census study, postal survey, interviews, focus groups and a policy and practice study. Study 2: Qualitative: Semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews, and focus groups.	The role of foster care in supporting unaccompanied refugee minors' transition to adulthood, drawing on recognition theory.	social network Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family
Söderqvist (2014)	Sweden	$N = 11$ (11M), 18–22, 3–5 years.	Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Iraq.	Qualitative: Interviews.	Unaccompanied minors' experiences of leaving care, and their experiences regarding perceptions about transnational ethnicity and culture.	Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Foster family Peers, friends and classmates Social workers
Thommessen, Corcoran, and Todd (2015)	Sweden	$N = 6$ (6M), 18–19, 3–4 years.	Afghanistan.	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews	Perceptions regarding the availability of support for unaccompanied minors.	Independent living Asylum system	Social workers
Thommessen, Corcoran, and Todd (2017)	England	$N = 6$ (5M, 1F), 18–28, ?.	Sub-Saharan Africa.	Qualitative: Personal construct assessment, group sessions.	Ways to improve post-migration development and integration.	Independent living Sense of identity and belonging	Family Peers, friends and classmates
Van Es et al. (2019)	The Netherlands	$N = 18$ (11M, 7F), 16–17, ?	Eritrea.	Qualitative: Focused ethnography using interviews, focus groups and observations.	Challenges and needs of Eritrean unaccompanied minors and their caregivers.	Independent living	Family
Verdasco (2020)	Denmark	$N = 21$ (19M, 2F)	Afghanistan, Eritrea, Kurdistan and other.	Qualitative: Ethnography	Routinised practices for agency and relatedness.	Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging	Peers, friends and classmates Social workers
Vervliet et al. (2015)	Belgium	$N = 52$ (52M), 13–17, ?	Afghanistan.	Mixed: Socio-demographic questionnaires, Aspirations Scale for Refugees and Migrants, semi-structured interviews.	Motivations and aspirations of refugee minors and their family or community pre-migration and after the children's arrival in their host country.	Education and employment	Family
Wade (2019)	United Kingdom	Case studies: $N = 21$ (? M/F), ?, ? Focus groups: $N = ?$ Foster carers are the focus of the study, social workers were also included.	?	Mixed: Surveys, focus groups, semi-structured case studies, and policy and practice analysis.	The experience of fostering, and the role of foster carers in helping young people adjusting.	Education and employment Independent living Building a social network Sense of identity and belonging Asylum system	Foster family
Wernesjö (2015)	Sweden	$N = 9$ (7M, 2F), 16–19, 1–2.5	Afghanistan and Somalia.	Qualitative: Interviews.	How unaccompanied children living in a rural village make sense of home and belonging.	Sense of identity and belonging	Peers, friends and classmates Social workers
Wimelius et al. (2017)	Sweden	Social workers ( $N = 4$ ), Custodians ( $N = 5$ ), Housing heads and coordinators ( $N = ?$ )		Qualitative: Interviews and focus groups	The efforts of actors involved in the reception of children and the promotion of their integration,	Education and employment Independent	Social workers Educators

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Authors (year)	Study Site	Study Population: Number of Participants (Gender), Age, Period of Residency in Host Country	Country of Origin	Research Design and Data Collection Methods	Research Topics	Transition Challenges	Social Relations
		= 4), various school staff (N = 16)			through a social ecological systems theory lens.	living Sense of identity and belonging	

<sup>a</sup> A question mark indicates that the data point was not available in the publication.

<sup>b</sup> While the authors do not provide an amount, they described that all of the Afghan youths were men, while the Eritrean group was mixed.

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