



The influence of residential care on young male unaccompanied asylum seekers in Malta

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Abstract

This paper will explore how young male unaccompanied asylum seekers, who hail from sub-Saharan African countries, experience residential care in Malta at a particular care home called Dar il-Liedna. In particular, this paper will consider the way this experience influences their life-plans, especially taking into account that they are at a transition point between their past in Africa and their future in Europe or elsewhere. The paper will also explore how they approach problem-resolution whilst in Malta – within the context of their current life situations and aspirations.

Keywords: Minor Asylum Seekers, Residential Care, Unaccompanied Minors

Introduction

This paper focuses on the impact that the residential care offered at Dar il-Liedna has on the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who are offered the possibility of living there by the competent authorities in Malta. Dar il-Liedna is a residential complex located in Fgura; a centrally located town in the south of this small central Mediterranean island. Dar il-Liedna is subdivided into two residential units that are run independently of one another. One of these units accepts male unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who are 16 to 17 years of age. The other unit caters for families, particularly those with small children. The former is the unit on which this paper is focused and the name Dar il-Liedna as used in this paper will thereby depict this unit only.

Dar il-Liedna was specifically set up to cater for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. These would have been granted leave to stay in Malta and for this reason generally hail from countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Malta and/or are considered unsafe by the Maltese government in line with policies established at European and International levels. The unaccompanied minor asylum seekers residing at Dar il-Liedna originate mainly from countries in the sub-Saharan region of the African continent. They traveled to Europe in the hope of building a brighter future, which they believed would not have materialized had they returned to their homelands or traveled to other parts of Africa. Some of the residents said that they came from countries that were characterized by armed conflicts and civil unrest. Such conflicts

would usually be fought between government forces or government supported militants and rebel groups. It is reliably known that armed forces, militants or rebel groups may deliberately target civilians, possibly also participating in such atrocities as lootings, setting fire to houses, torture, killings, rape, or carrying out genocide which is based on “hating man as a man” (Ballet, Mahieu, & Radja, 2007, p. 37). It therefore comes as no surprise that young people should leave war-torn areas. More importantly, this also underlines the relevance of sensitivity to the overall context through which certain unaccompanied minor asylum seekers find themselves in Malta. In attempting to understand these asylum seekers, the different traumatic experiences that they have endured need to be seen “in terms of a dynamic, two-way interaction between the victimized individual(s) and the surrounding society, ... and not (only) as a relatively static, circumscribable entity to be located and addressed within the individual psychology of those affected” (Summerfield, 1995, p. 19).

Malta is the southernmost EU member state and is located between Libya (which is located 300 kilometres to the south) and Sicily (which is located 93 kilometres to the north). It is popularly believed that asylum seekers are originally bound for Italy and that they arrive in Malta as a result of circumstances over which they have no control – such as bad weather that can arise sometimes quite suddenly during their crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, some participants say that they chose Malta as a destination. In such cases, this would be usually since they have relatives or friends on the island.

It logically follows that, understandably, if the asylum seekers have access to people whom they know and trust, then they would feel better equipped, and henceforth, more encouraged, to make the journey and transition to Europe. This type of migrant social capital, as it is called, is not new to the literature. In effect, it has come to be associated with processes of cumulative causation (Massey, 1990). By this, it is implied that as a result of the information that particularly the more seasoned asylum seekers pass on, aspiring migrants can be given information about possible migration routes and other related data. This means that to fully appreciate the asylum seekers’ motivation for travelling; the initial reason for migrating needs to be seen in the context of the influence of people who have already migrated and who are willing to share their know-how with aspiring migrants.

To appreciate the influence of residential care in Malta on the asylum seekers, their treatment; initially in Africa, then, when travelling, and eventually when crossing the Mediterranean Sea, needs to be taken into account. This must be considered alongside the overall climate of acceptance or rejection from the people resident in Malta. This is because, in Malta, as in other countries, certain people exhibit nationalist and extreme right tendencies, arguing that asylum seekers are unwanted in Malta and urging the government to deport them. Others object to their presence claiming that the country is far too small to accommodate them. This can prove to be traumatic to young people who after all are at an age when feeling accepted by friends and peers is usually perceived as being of personal importance and developmental significance. On a broader political level, Dar il-Liedna can be seen as a statement in opposition to any views that denigrate the asylum-seekers. Complementing this, it offers, on a symbolic level, an assertion that asylum seekers are deserving of respect for their dignity, and, on a more practical level, an attestation that they deserve decent accommodation. Stating this, it has to be remembered that the asylum-seekers are not a homogenous group. Although some come from the same countries of origin, there is a diversity of regional languages, customs, traditions and immigration histories that define their communities. They each have their individual strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, they all have their own individual plans and aspirations for the future.

The primary purpose of this research is to illustrate what living in Dar il-Liedna means to the asylum seekers and how it has influenced their perception of themselves and the world they live in. The paper will also explore how the asylum seekers see themselves in future, most especially

if they foresee themselves encountering ethnocentric practices in Europe that could cause them to occupy minority positions in a wider social context.

Literature review

According to studies that have been carried out to gauge social work practice with immigrants and refugees (see for instance, Balgopal, 2000), sometimes the boundary line between immigrant and refugee, or between immigrant and asylum seeker can be somewhat blurred. For instance, Balgopal (Balgopal, 2000) points out that there is a great diversity of people entering the United States and while at one point in history it would have been possible to single out who were the “Jewish pushcart peddlers, now there are Korean greengrocers, Indian newsstand dealers, Ethiopian and Caribbean bus boys, Mexican and Central American gardeners and farm-hands, Vietnamese fishermen, and Nigerian and Pakistani cab-drivers (p. 1).” The word immigrant is therefore clearly a legal status that is bestowed on people to offer them the right to take up employment with all associated rights and obligations. Immigrants thereby partake in the fuller aspects of what ordinarily is considered ‘citizenship’ in a given society today (Spiteri & Law, 2010). Having stated this, there is a clear distinction between asylum seeker and immigrant that goes deeper than a simple legal status.

Immigrants are normally considered to be people who “leave their countries voluntarily” (Pot-pcky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 4), usually in search of better economic opportunities. They would usually know where they are going and they would have probably planned things out with relative peace of mind. Moreover, in certain cases, they may also have mixed feelings about leaving their homeland, particularly until they settle down in their new country. When finding themselves in such a context, they might even find themselves doubting and questioning whether the decision to emigrate was *really* the right thing to have done. *Bona fide* asylum seekers, on the other hand, tend to be fleeing oppression of some sort. They are motivated by running away from something, by running toward something, or possibly by both. In Malta, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are granted what is called a subsidiary status. This status allows them to stay in Malta at least until they turn 18 years old. Under Maltese legislation, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are defined either as minors (young people under the age of 18) who have come to Malta on their own (i.e. without their parents or legally recognized guardians) or who have been left unaccompanied after they have entered Malta (see Refugee Act, 2001 of the Laws of Malta).

Although previous studies on the capacity of resilience in minor asylum seekers have been carried out (see, for instance, Rousseau, Said, Gagné, & Bibeau, 1998), no studies have explored how unaccompanied minor asylum seekers cope when assigned to residential care in a Maltese context. For this reason, the current study provides an original contribution to the existing literature. Moreover, when discussing the applicability of findings, it has to be constantly held in mind that the particular situation of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers is clearly distinguishable from that of other looked after young people or children in care in Malta. This is partially because the particular events and happenings in their lives are dissimilar to those faced by young people who have lived in Malta all their lives. It is also because, normally, children in Malta are registered at birth, and for this reason it is relatively easy to have an exact record of when (and where) they were born.

With unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, determining a person’s age is a problematic issue particularly, because, normally, they would not carry any identifying papers on them, implying that it would be impossible to trace their date of birth through documentation. Stating this, compounding matters further, in all cultures and contexts, while certain children look like chil-

dren, others look like young men and women. Different types of physical, social and cultural factors all play part in how old a person looks. In cases of serious doubt, simply looking at a person would not provide a wholly reliable indication of age (Levenson & Sharma, 1999). A problem therefore arises as people can claim that they are minors and not be believed. Likewise, older people can claim that they are minors fraudulently, simply to obtain the benefits that are awarded to younger people.

Naturally, other differences prevail in the context of looked after children and young people in Malta and those who come from certain African countries. For instance, from a social and psychological perspective, some asylum seekers report having survived wars and possibly natural disasters, as well as having witnessed or having been victims of such troubling experiences as the deaths of close family members, or of torture and sexual assault. Living in intense situations where one is always anticipating the outbreak of war or the eruption of some form of violence can also be intensely traumatic (Hopkins & Hill, 2006; Chase et al., 2008). This suggests that a specialized service needs to be extended to asylum seekers that is responsive and sensitive to their needs (Balgopal, 2000). This implies that young asylum seekers are likely to experience a need for caring adults who understand the complexity of their experiences. In previous studies, one of the authors (DS) has pointed out that one way of developing and extending such a service is through having staff members constantly enhance their intercultural sensitivity (Spiteri, 2008, 2010a). This is simply because communication between staff and residents must be clear if it is to be effective. Naturally, to further enhance the ongoing resilience and coping mechanisms of the asylum seekers – what Goodman (2004, p. 1178) calls their “adaptive strengths” – they would need to assimilate any responses or feedback they received with their own repertoire of behaviours and world-views. This places upon staff at Dar il-Liedna the responsibility of developing knowledge about how to interact effectively with people from other cultures both as part of their own ‘natural’ repertoire of behaviours and as something that they constantly strive to build upon and improve (Gudykunst, 1992, Spitzberg, 2000).

Since intercultural sensitivity is thereby associated clearly with self-awareness and with knowing one’s own cultural beliefs and efforts, communication with asylum seekers needs also to be based on self-reflection and introspection (Nagata, 2004, Bennett & Bennett, 2004). This could involve, for instance, the setting up of group work interventions using hands-on and experiential approaches involving philosophically informed dialogue. Spiteri (2010b) suggests that this could involve engaging both the asylum seekers and staff at residential homes like Dar il-Liedna in telling each other stories of interest. These stories can also be used to enhance knowledge about the cultures of each inhabitant. They could thereby bring about greater intercultural sensitivity whilst serving as a medium for communication that embraces and includes all present.

Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative methodology. This type of methodology was selected partially so as to give a broad emic appreciation of how young people experience their stay at Dar il-Liedna and partially to allow the researchers in-depth exploration of what the participants said. The research design selected was a phenomenological case study approach. The research was carried out in October and November 2008, when the participants were living at Dar il-Liedna. By the end of December that same year, all participants had left Malta to go and settle down in other countries in Europe.

All the participants claimed to have traveled to Malta from Libya. None of them had any travel documents on arrival in Malta and they had all initially been taken into detention after having

been picked up by the authorities. Only two of the participants claimed that their boat had reached Malta. The remainder asserted that they had been picked up by the Search and Rescue Operations Team after having been sighted by vessels who had alerted them and who subsequently brought them to shore in Malta. One participant who was rescued by the Search and Rescue Operations Team said that he was on a boat that was in danger of sinking and that it had already started to take in water before the people on the boat were rescued.

Since the young people interviewed were minors, written consent to proceed with this study was requested from the Children's and Young Peoples' Advisory Board within the Ministry for Social Policy. On this being granted, the researchers proceeded to ask the young people concerned if they wanted to be interviewed. One of the researchers (RZ) is the care coordinator of the home and it can be safely assumed that the participants trusted in the interview process because of the rapport he had established with them. Naturally, this had to be balanced against the possibility that since he was perceived as an authority figure, there might have been information that they would have preferred not to disclose to him. For this reason, as well as to prevent the participants from feeling overwhelmed, it was decided that only one of the researchers (DS) would carry out the interviews. (DS) had carried out group-work, on a voluntary basis, at Dar il-Liedna, and he was thereby not new to the participants either.

The participants originated from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Nigeria. All names have been changed in line with ethical considerations of anonymity. There were two Ethiopian participants who have been assigned the names Ogbury and Lebna, there was a Nigerian participant who has been assigned the name Bem, and there were three Somali participants who have been assigned the names Abdi, Dalmar and Ahmed.

Participation in the study was voluntary and for this reason the small size of the sample was easily justifiable, considering that the asylum seekers could very easily have been suspicious of people who would be asking them questions about certain aspects of their lives. They were informed that the data given was to be presented at the 'Where is Home?' conference that was hosted by the Salesians of Don Bosco in collaboration with the Commissioner for Children between the 12th and 14th March 2009, at the Hilton, Malta, and would also be used in a post-conference publication (the current publication).

The data was analyzed in the manner suggested by Colaizzi (1978) who recommends that firstly data is transcribed and then the content broken down into themes and categories that are descriptive of the meanings that the data could convey. After engaging in this process, the researchers then needed to verify if the meanings that they had deduced were similarly perceived by the group of participants as a whole. With this in mind, the themes and categories that the researchers deemed as appropriate were then presented to the participants by one of the researchers (RZ) for their validation and feedback. No changes or additions were suggested by the participants. This served to further indicate to the researchers, who were careful to include all the data submitted to them in their analysis, that the data was saturated.

All participants could speak and communicate in English, and for this reason, it was deemed unnecessary to trace an interpreter who could also have been present. The interviews assumed an essentially unstructured format and the participants were free to raise any points that they considered relevant or that they saw as following on to what they were saying. The researchers did not present an interview schedule but rather engaged in discussing arising themes stemming from leading ideas, namely an opening question on 'how do you think that Dar il-Liedna has influenced you?' and other arising questions such as 'what plans do you have for your future?', 'where do you see yourself going from here?' and 'would you like to tell us something about your initial decision to reach Europe?'

The themes and categories that the researchers evolved in collaboration with the participants are discussed below.

Results

Two categories or thematic clusters were identified, as reproduced in the figure below.

Category	Theme
(1) Social Interaction	(i) Residential setting
	(ii) Feeling excluded
(2) Ways of coping	(i) Finding a job
	(ii) Overcoming trauma

Social Interaction

Social interaction at Dar il-Liedna was viewed by the participants as something supportive and positive. Consonant with earlier studies (Spiteri, 2008) all the participants appreciated that in order to develop their futures positively, they would need other people. They would thereby have to find and form sympathetic and helpful social networks. They were also conscious that since they were living at Dar il-Liedna, they had to be able to get along with the other residents as well as the staff.

The residential setting

Although the participants clashed with one another occasionally, none of them harboured long term ill-feeling about the other residents. They described themselves as “a good group” for this reason. Such a positive social and emotional climate normally serves to alleviate mental suffering (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005), and is something which would have tended to help them enjoy a better adjustment, most especially if they had experienced severe psychological trauma in the past. The participants also appreciated that they were living in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting. They saw this as preparation for their lives in Europe. The participants said that:

“In Somalia, you make friends with other Somalis. You make friends with people of your own clan, or of your own sub-clan, or of your own sub-sub-clan, and that’s about it. Here, you make friends with people from other parts of Africa, with the Maltese, there are no limits to the friends you can make. It’s a part of freedom, an important part of freedom, you can be friends with anyone.” (Abdi)

“Here at Dar il-Liedna, you realise that your home-background is something to be proud of. You develop a sort of ethnic pride in your own people, in your own culture. You realise that you are coming from somewhere. You realise that being Ethiopian is something special. You realise that you are special.” (Ogbury)

The residential setting provided the place where the participants had to adjust to a different cultural context, new surroundings and a different residential climate to that which they had experienced previously. The participants pointed out that the staff eased this process by making each of them feel validated as a person and “wanted, welcome and important” (Abdi). Naturally, the practise of such values as the individuation of residents by the staff; where the asylum seek-

ers are assisted to set and reach their own goals, is central to caring in an effective and professional way (Anderson and Yohanson, 2008).

Feeling excluded

Stating this, and contrary to the interventions and assistance of the staff, the majority of the participants were conscious that despite the good relationships that they had managed to form at Dar il-Liedna, they had not integrated themselves in Maltese society in the manner that they would have liked.

Bem was the only one who explained how, although he was faced with hostility by the Maltese initially, he had succeeded in overcoming it. He pointed out with satisfaction that he had managed to relate to certain Maltese people, particularly workmates whom he had succeeded in befriending. On deeper probing, it emerged that most of the participants spent much of their free time at the open centres at Hal-Far or at Marsa where they socialised with other Africans. Meeting people mostly from their own countries of origin in whom they had trust did not create the opportunities or the context for the residents to come to know the Maltese or for the Maltese to come to know them, thereby making it more difficult, if not plainly impossible, for such friendships to come about.

Furthermore, it emerged that the establishment of intraethnic (within the migrant group) social contacts tended to override the establishment of interethnic social contacts, most especially as the migrants tended to find people from their own home country or tribe when visiting the open centres. This limited their adjustment to European culture not only as they were effectively shutting certain people out, thereby making themselves inaccessible and limiting their own understanding of people from other cultures, but also because this was not serving to prepare them for a new social context. From a psychological perspective, within a multicultural setting, context or country, people who are integrated both intra- and inter-ethnically tend to be amongst the better adjusted (Sam, 1994).

In most cases, the participants stated that the intercultural learning process in which they became involved at Dar il-Liedna between people of different cultures was not extended outside Dar il-Liedna. The participants said that when they went out of the door (of Dar il-Liedna) they stayed, as they put it, "with people like us" (Abdi) or "amongst our own" (Ahmed). On further exploration of the theme of meeting up socially with people of other nationalities or ethnic groupings, one of the participants suggested that more effort should be made by the staff to engage the asylum seekers in activities whereby "we could meet up with other young people of different cultures who would want to meet up with us" (Bem). This could have shown a desire for greater intercultural communication skills.

Ways of coping

The participants also discussed at length their day-to-day living strategies. The ways in which they approached these strategies were influenced by such aspects as their skills, knowledge and also their ability to come to terms with past hurts, as described below.

Finding a job

All the participants claimed that the most important thing for them whilst in Malta was finding a job. They were concerned that in the majority of cases, they were exploited and given a more meagre wage than a Maltese person working in similar conditions would receive. Some reported having been cheated by not being paid at all for the work that they did, despite their having agreed on such payments with the employer. The majority did not see the possibility of

their taking up studies in order to advance themselves in the labour market. Only one of the participants engaged in such training; attending an EU part-funded course of lectures at the University of Malta. The others claimed that their priority was finding work since they needed money for daily expenses that were not covered at Dar il-Liedna, money to send remittances to family members who were abroad and money to be able to buy a plane ticket in order to leave Malta.

Overcoming trauma

The participants claimed that they had devised their own ways of coping with life in Malta. They asserted that both their past and their future caused them concern. None of the participants could envision a future in the place they had come from and each narrated stories of pain, poverty and sometimes, fear. They all stated that their futures were uncertain. On coming to Malta, whilst feeling thankful that they were alive for they knew of many who had died when making such a journey, they also missed their relatives, their wider home community and the social support that they had had. This is summed up by Ahmed:

"In Malta, people behave in ways that are different to those I was used to in Somalia. In Somalia we had a sort of common family system. It is a social type of society even though everyone is out to kill everyone else if troubles between the clans arise. Yet, people help one another. No matter what, there is someone there who will offer to help you. Over here, in Malta, maybe in all of Europe, nobody bothers about anyone else outside Dar il-Liedna. This is why I must use my life for myself. I am completely on my own. If I waste things, if I waste time, or if I give someone something for nothing, I would be the loser. This is why I cannot let other people tell me how to live my life. My life is my own. This is what my freedom is all about." (Ahmed)

The participants also expressed fears relating to their own marginal position/relative powerlessness in Malta, which was exacerbated by the knowledge that they might never find a country or land to accept them. Stating this, it is also possible that their sense of being in a state of constant transition could possibly further foster social isolation, thereby increasing their distress all the more (Lavik et al., 1996). Their having been detained on entry to Malta by the police and Armed Forces of Malta did not help matters. The participants actively questioned why they had to be detained and what functional purpose detention served. Lebna and Dalma both asserted that being questioned by the police and immigration authorities in Malta reminded them of past traumas stemming from the unwarranted use of force by officials in their home-countries, most especially since, once questioning was over, they were immediately transferred to detention.

Compounding such distress was the 1990 Dublin II Convention that places responsibility on the state where they first landed for taking them back should they abscond to another European member state and be detected via fingerprinting identification techniques. Bem explained that because of this, it was important that he just "disappear" to another country in Europe, if necessary heading out of certain European countries illegally so that he would not be detected. He said that in the long-term he would like to go to England but was uncertain how he was going to get there. All the participants said that, if people had to be locked up for any reason, then at least they should be given things to do to occupy their time whilst in detention. They argued that they should be given lessons in English or in skills that they would need if they were to live in a European context, rather than simply being "locked up in cages" (Abdi).

"Detention makes it look as if I chose to come here. I am not here out of choice. I am here out of no choice. I had to choose between staying in Africa and dying or moving on and moving out. That is why I am here, speaking to you today, in the manner which I am. Yet, I always knew that I would not be in detention forever." (Ogbury)

“Detention is an ugly thing. Yet, it is from there, from the short time I spent there, that I was given my freedom, freedom-freedom – the freedom to be here in Europe and to be myself. Today I have freedom. I have never had freedom before. Freedom is the most important thing.” (Abdi)

None of the participants wanted to stay in Malta for longer than they felt they had to. Three months was a very long time for them, even though the participants stayed in Malta for an average of eight or nine months before eventually going abroad.

Discussion

The participants’ narratives about social interaction and ways of coping do not offer a ready-to-go manual of prescriptions and directives that have to be followed by staff at Dar il-Lidena or possibly in other similar settings. Rather, they point to how the participants adopted coping capacities that were based on developing satisfying interpersonal relationships (both intraethnic and interethnic) whilst at Dar il-Liedna. They also point to the need that they have to come to terms with suffering and the issues of poverty and such social ills as persecution or warfare that they encountered in their home-countries. The participants have said that they have found themselves needing to learn how to cope with such arising eventualities as the loss of friends or loved ones; the possible loss of their culture; and the reality that they feel sometimes on their own since their immediate family members or family networks would not be nearby. They also experience difficulties or unwillingness when it comes to relating to people of other nationalities or ethnic groupings outside of Dar il-Liedna.

It is evident that asylum seekers in Malta face multiple challenges in their lives and these include social interpretations of what being an asylum seeker means in an overall Maltese context. In this study, the participants said that they felt empowered to forge their life-plans as a result of their interactions with staff at Dar il-Liedna. Yet, they also mentioned both their traumatic past and their uncertain futures as constantly leading them to feel insecure and the need to develop resilience to counteract this. In contrast to the idea that resilience applies to particular people who have particular character traits, this study shows that the participants’ resilience has developed over time as a result of their encountering particular life events. As Edmond (2010, p. 64) points out “many of those involved in the development of resilience as an analytical and conceptual tool for practice have stressed the need to recognize that resilience is not simply a set of characteristics with a child (or young person), but rather that it (resilience) operates within the context or environment in which that child (or young person) is living.” For instance, detention was seen as something transient, since the asylum seekers knew that there would come a time when they could put this behind them.

A particular aspect of the participants’ life-courses that emerged clearly in this study was their emphasis on the acquisition of freedom. Freedom was not simply the act of being set free from detention. Rather, it was a construct that was based on how they saw themselves in a European context. This self is not simply constituted of one that achieves its goals but also one that is connected to friends and relatives. This is evidenced both by their desire to send remittances abroad and also to build up social capital – at least within their own networks. Freedom is therefore partly a desire to cooperate with groups of people who are significant to them and sometimes this overrides individual preferences even when in Malta, and out of their home context. Somewhat reminiscent of Frankl’s (2000) famous assertion that the last of human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances and therefore to choose one’s own way; the participants in this study see freedom as a chance to forge their own goals in a manner that is consistent with their own values.

Conclusion

In exploring how unaccompanied minor asylum seekers live their lives, make plans for their future and come to terms with past hurts, this study shows that they appreciate the human aspect of care that is extended at Dar il-Liedna. The participants perceived their stay at Dar il-Liedna as a means of self-empowerment for a better future, mainly as it offered them a context where they could reflect on their own realities, where they could integrate with others who were in the same position, and where they could plan out their futures. Thus even though, according to a report by the Jesuit Refugee Services (2005, p. 6), asylum seekers in Malta “are among the most disadvantaged in terms of access to material or financial assistance and professional or other services,” it is possible that those who were at Dar il-Liedna were slightly better off than other asylum seekers in Malta. This can be seen since, throughout this study, the participants gave accounts that uphold the thesis that they did not respond passively to events and circumstances. For instance, they created an adaptive orientation as they prepared themselves to make another transition as they gathered resources in order to plan for and make the journey away from Malta.

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Author's notes

Dr. Damian Spiteri

has recently obtained his doctorate in the sociology of education. Since then he has conducted studies and published them in reviewed journals in the area of at-risk youths in Malta. He is also an active social-worker, having worked both with the Maltese school social services and with Caritas Malta (which offers a generic service). After having taught social studies for eight years at a school for adolescent boys with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties, he moved on to become a focal person within the Education Department's Anti-Substance Abuse Unit. His work there is mainly preventative in focus. Dr. Spiteri's interest in minor asylum seekers is traceable to project work that he had carried out in one of the homes of these young people on behalf of Caritas Malta and that left him with a desire to generate greater understanding and awareness of the refugee situation in Malta.

Ronald Zammit

graduated with an Honours Degree in Psychology in 2006 from the University of Malta. Since then, he has been working for the Organization for the Integration and Welfare of Asylum Seekers (OIWAS) as Care Coordinator of two residential care programmes, one of which caters for asylum-seeking

unaccompanied minors aged between 16 and 18 years and the other which caters for families with children. OIWAS, which was set up two years ago with the remit of providing appropriate care to migrants, operates within the Ministry for Justice and Home Affairs. For several years, Ronald was also highly involved in voluntary work with young persons with disability, having co-founded, in 2002, the youth group LAND (Living Ability not Disability). This group aims to achieve independence and inclusion for its members through social activities. He has facilitated several discussions and activities on themes related to disability, migration, and other social issues in schools, colleges, workplaces, and youth centres.