QRP

PRACTICE REPORTS

Critical Social Work and Unaccompanied Refugee Minors' Social Inclusion:
An Example of Critical Best Practice[1]

Aikaterini Oikonomou[2] and Agapi Kandylaki[3]

Abstract

This article presents an example of critical best social work practice with unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Based on a critical perspective, it focuses on social and community work interventions in the first reception centre, established in Greece, before the huge influx of refugees in 2015, aiming to support, empower and achieve social integration of the hosted youths. Drawing from the first author's narrative, recalling her practice experience in the field as an 'intervening researcher', the article discusses the actions taken through a critical perspective. Within this perspective, social work practice discussed here focuses on meeting the needs of the youths, defending their rights and empowering them, while building bridges with the local community to achieve their social inclusion. A critical perspective is used as an interpretative framework of analysis. It thus also underlines the critical role of the local community towards the integration of unaccompanied minors.

Key Words:

Critical social work, unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers, refugees, reception centre

1   Introduction

The movement of unaccompanied minors to Europe is not a new phenomenon, but the emerging current conditions are such that action urgently needs to be undertaken in order to address significant issues of child protection (Breen, 2019). The increasingly critical conditions, evolving by continuous inflows and the urgent necessity to manage the conditions of accommodation and integration of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the host countries, stress the need to revise interventions. Within this framework, the social work role needs to be redefined in accordance with the policies concerning the management of the refugee phenomenon. In order to respond to the increasing needs of the incoming population and especially that of unaccompanied minors, social workers are expected to provide social protection and empower them so

---

they are able to plan their lives anew. They are invited to take a critical stance towards the policies adopted and implemented, to reflect on their own attitudes and perceptions, to re-evaluate their strategies and to readjust their practice and actions, aiming at protecting human rights and promoting social justice (Fook, 2016).

Social work, as an applied social science, is called upon to face and cope with new data and situations, which are constantly created in the social environment, with social change as its focus. The global and political context developed by financial crises, climate change, the emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic, forced migration and refugee rights, along with the restructuring of welfare and care systems for refugees, and especially for unaccompanied minors, are among the most pressing issues that social sector professionals worldwide are faced with (Ferguson et al., 2018; Kamali, 2015). In an era of global transformations and massive movements of people – and within the context of the national institutional frameworks of immigration policy and its inability to manage the large numbers of children and young people "on the move" – it is important to reconsider social work interventions, which currently focus on responding to the needs for living conditions, care and integration, as well as providing appropriate services to unaccompanied minors. Submitting policy proposals that may revise the focus of the interventions at an institutional level is crucial.

Within a human rights perspective, it is urgent that social work responds to the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers specific needs in terms of reception and assistance conditions in the host country. All should have access to welfare, protection, education and health services. Priority should be given to the rehabilitation and treatment needs based on psychological and other traumatic experiences they have endured. In all cases, their best interests need to be determined and appropriate measures should be taken to protect them (Spyropoulou, 2016). However, social workers' interventions in receptions centres and hostels for unaccompanied minors in Greece are very specifically determined. Their responsibilities are described in detail by International Organisations. However, due to deficient policies and insufficient funding (Nikolopoulos, 2018), social workers are frequently unable to meet the real needs of the people. Thus the need for the revision of social workers' role is essential. Examples of critical best practice may contribute towards this direction.

This article attempts to highlight the importance of critical social work in supporting and strengthening the resilience of refugee minors through a case study of a critical best practice. It further reveals the factors that contribute to their successful settlement and integration in the host country, going beyond the limits of a "deficit approach", focusing on the role that a local community can acquire.

2   Critical Social Work

An extensive literature review concludes that critical social work is a dynamic approach with multiple interpretations (Adams et al., 2009; Allan, 2003; Baines, 2007; Campbell, 2003; Carniol, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Hick & Pozzuto, 2005; Leonard, 2001; Mullaly, 2007). Its central point is critical reflection, which encourages questioning the way of thinking and acting. It can lead to alternative ways of interpreting and dealing with social problems and structures. The starting point of the critical

approach is the admission that social work practice aims to enact social change and tackle social inequality (Campbell & Baikie, 2012).

Critical social work is based on connecting all critical theories and it emphasizes on the statement that society has been constantly changing, and it is thus subject to revolutionary changes (Payne et al., 2002). Based on critical theory, social work takes critical thinking as its starting point, which helps professionals connect human behaviour with the given environment in which they operate in (Giannou, 2012: 3). At the same time, the main pursuit is the promotion of social justice (Healy, 2001).

As critical social work is based on critical thinking, its characteristic elements are observation, the ability to define the problem, "boldness" in thinking, the readiness to challenge any dogma or prevailing opinion and the equal and in-depth investigation and analysis of the content of all parameters (Seelig, 1991). After all, "critic" means to judge, to call into question (Liddell & Scott, 2006).

The purpose of critical thinking and analysis in social work is to enable professionals, through self-awareness, to connect human behaviour with the specific environment in which people operate in order to question and change those prevailing relationships in society, which create and perpetuate injustice and inequality (Dominelli, 2002). Through critical thinking, ideas and beliefs which are considered as undisputed facts are challenged, and stereotypes, prejudices and racist and sexist attitudes may be revealed. It may also be clear how they may be intergenerational. Self-awareness is a necessary skill for professionals to understand how these social processes are internalized by the individuals and they subsequently shape each individual's way of thinking and acting (Ioakimidis, 2011; Kallinikaki, 2011). For critical social work, this understanding is particularly important, as its effectiveness is judged by whether it manages to change anything that is passed down from generation to generation and works against people (O'Sullivan, 1999).

This presupposes a continuous process of both investigating and questioning on behalf of professionals, as well as criticizing the ways in which their daily practice in the area and the domain in which they work and operate is indeed part of the intended social change. It is important for professionals to seek an informed and global collection of information and an insightful analysis of data in regards to the relevant conditions for each issue, which helps them to recognize their "own" agreement or their "opposing opinion and attitude". Furthermore, it is essential for social workers to critically reflect on the preconceptions and stereotypes they may have adopted in order to arrive at a perception that is as global and "objective" as possible, free from prejudices and discrimination. The recognition, critical acceptance and synthesis of different ideas and new situations leads to the development of a global perception of the 'whole' (Brown & Rutter, 2008, as cited in Kandylaki, 2018: 13-41).

Social workers' understanding of the nature of conditions and changes, as well as the complexity of the environment in which they intervene, the social structures, processes and practices, which have produced oppression, is essential. At the same time, promoting the rights of vulnerable groups, social inclusion and equal opportunities is critical (Lacroix, 2006; Östman, 2019). They should be able to commit, reason and make informed decisions by being able to explain the "what" and "how" of their practice (Fook,

2018, as cited in Kandylaki, 2018) and being able to continue developing methods and strategies for their best interest. By doing so – and after appropriate evaluation, consideration and utilization – they can plan their intervention in direct collaboration with young people, based on their individual needs. Professionals' critical thinking and critical reflection may support their attempt to address institutional and structural discrimination and reveal the causes of oppression related to "therness" in terms of race, social class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture and sexual orientation. These may relate to social work practice which promotes empowerment and resilience strengthening, liberation and improvement of individuals' quality of life, particularly of those living in vulnerable and oppressed conditions. Social work actions may also promote societal changes, social justice and social inclusion (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] & International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014). This is why the assumption and position regarding the promotion of social change presupposes that the reflection and "critical" consideration of social work lies at the heart of its identity (Fook, 2016).

3   The Centre for Unaccompanied Minors as an Example of "Critical Best Practice"

The question addressed is whether an intervention can be considered as a "critical best practice" and whether similar actions or methods may be applied successfully in other relevant cases, especially when they occur at another point in time. It may also be of interest to examine whether the subject of interest noticeable in one case, can represent the phenomenon in general (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Case studies, on the other hand, may provide insight into the study of a social phenomenon and thus contribute to the establishment of a theory relevant to its understanding and management (Stake, 1994). The hereby presented case study of "The Anogeia Reception Centre for Minor Asylum Seekers" allowed for an in-depth research and analysis (Creswell, 1998). It thus enabled the recognition of an example of critical best practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1970). The Reception Centre was the first to operate in Greece and is run by the National Youth Foundation at the facilities of the Anogeia Unit of Crete since July 2000. It is considered an example of "critical best practice" in the hosting, accommodation and inclusion of minors, following Ferguson's (2003) criteria, for a number of reasons: First of all, critical theory was used as an interpretive framework in the present practice. Throughout the research process and during the various stages of its completion, the social worker was given the opportunity to reflect within a supervision process on the phases of integration of unaccompanied minors and the contribution of social work to it. Interviews carried out as part of her thesis research with professionals employed in reception centres throughout the country, as well as with a number of refugees who were accommodated as unaccompanied minors in Anogeia fifteen years after their first arrival in Crete revealed the process of successful integration of these young people to Cretan community. It has also been clear that a critical consideration of the practice developed in the centre was essential to their integration in the local community. By illustrating many years of experience, with its strengths and weaknesses, the dissemination of knowledge and practice of support, empowerment and integration of unaccompanied refugee minors within the host country becomes evident (Ferguson, 2003). Furthermore, the Centre, in its early days of operating, was nominated by the (then) High Commissioner in Greece, as a *"Model Centre, which should be an example for other*

European countries" (UNHCR, 2004a, as cited in Oikonomou, 2020: 416), and it was included in the *"Good Practices for hosting refugee minors"* report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN Human Rights Commission (Tsovili & Voutira, 2004; Petit, 2005, as cited in Oikonomou, 2020: 429-434), for creating experiential knowledge, i.e. "knowledge produced by practice, actions and procedures" useful for similar centres.

Furthermore, it has provided a framework for trainee social workers' internships, and it has developed cooperation with academics in Greece and elsewhere, as well as with many cultural associations and various social bodies, facilitating, thus, the possibility of implementing intercultural social work based on human rights and anti-oppressive approaches in practice. The minors who were initially hosted in the Centre were interviewed fifteen years later (see Oikonomou, 2020), and they underlined the importance of their experience in the Centre for their integration in the local community. They highlighted the period after the completion of the Centre's hosting program. It is also important to state that this project refers to a socially vulnerable group and it is based on the promotion of social justice and the right to a better quality of life, free from violence, abuse and exploitation (see Kandylaki & Kallinikaki, 2018: 1569).

4   The First Seps – A Personal Narrative

The writers of this article were involved in this project from different roles. One, the first author, worked as the first social worker at the Anogeia Centre from 2001 to 2007, and she has thus contributed to the organization and operation of its Social Service, while the other, through supervision, assisted on critical reflection and on linking theory to practice. It is important to mention that from the very first day at work, the first author was faced with a strange situation, as she unexpectedly met a group of 25 smiling individuals, "mature" young people, instead of the namely small, "helpless" children, she expected to see. The "isolated" geographically, but always "in the midst of things" community of Anogeia was the first area to host unaccompanied minors in Greece. The first reception and hospitality at the Centre for both the minors and the social worker was particularly "warm" and "unique". From the very first moment of her stay there, she noticed the love and interest shown by all of the staff for the children and at the same time she realized the desire and everyone's need for another ally, and especially a social worker, who will support their effort to accommodate and integrate in the local community.

Initially, what was important was to study and get to know the general context of the institution, i.e. the supervisory and funding bodies, such as the National Youth Foundation, the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity and the European Refugee Fund, the implementing body, i.e. the Anogeia Unit, as well as the staff and everyone's role in it.

It was necessary to study and seek information about the refugee issue and the target group in general. It was also essential to get to know the specific guests in person, i.e. to get to know where they came from, what were the reasons that forced them to leave their homeland, how they moved, what they thought and how they felt, what difficulties they were faced with, what they expected, etc. It was simultaneously important to familiarize with the local community and the agencies that were active in it and to

explore the perception and attitudes of the locals regarding the hosting of unaccompanied minors.

Most importantly, however, it was essential for the social worker to perceive, shape and define her professional role. Through the tasks and responsibilities assigned to her, she was expected to realize not only "what" she had to do, but more specifically "how" to approach persons and the arising matters, especially when there was no previous experience in this field. On one hand, she tried to distinguish the position of social work in the intervention with unaccompanied minors and to rely on the principles of human rights and the promotion of social justice, while she reflected critically on her practice (Sue, 2006). These helped her to choose the strategy and the interventions she would follow. A question frequently raised was whether she should treat the youths as "victims", focusing on their past, deficits and dysfunctions, or whether she should count on them as "active participants" in decision-making, in meeting their needs and in the process of mediating to promote their rights by enhancing their advantages and strengths (Corcoran, 2012; McCashen, 2007; Saleebey, 2014). The evaluation of the interventions showed that both were done depending on where each young person stood and what their personal capabilities and needs were. An individual action plan was designed for everyone based on their particular needs. The group processes and meetings, on the other hand, aimed, among other evolving issues, to identify each person's strengths, while it simultaneously focused on working on their presented weaknesses. Most importantly, it was centred on helping them realize their personal and individual responsibility for the future (Nair, 2013; Wade et al., 2003).

An important condition was to gain the trust of each individual. The social worker's previous long-term work experience with another vulnerable group, the "Roma", and the study of relevant literature had informed her that, until a relationship of trust was established between individuals, due to their previously experienced frequent violent and oppressive incidents from people in authority positions, there would be a great deal of suspicion on the youths' part towards people who hold a position of prestige and authority (for this, see Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2007; McDonald, 2016; Mitchell & Baylis, 2003, Okitikpi & Aymer, 2003, Wade et al., 2003). To gain trust and invite them to open up, respect, unconditional acceptance and genuine interest and concern for the minors were essential (Arnold & Collins, 2010-2011; Nair, 2013; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). Therefore, a full, fixed program with a variety of activities and commitments in every contact and meeting was scheduled in partnership with the youths, while consistency in delivering on what was agreed each time, as well as direct proposals for new ways to meet their needs, shaped the overall collaboration.

Spending time to get to know them and developing a framework of intimacy was essential. Meetings even outside working hours and the institutional context, through walks in the village and visits in various shops and cafes of the village, by watching and participating in the youths' activities at the local stadium, etc. contributed to developing a good professional relationship (Campbell & Baikie, 2012; Kohli, 2007). Meetings outside working hours also helped the locals meet the 'new guests' and contributed to developing a sense of familiarity between them as well as a mutual acceptance. Another important fact that facilitated the acceptance of the young people by the residents was the love and affection of the staff members of the Centre, who originated from Anogeia and the surrounding area. They treated the minors as their own children, and

automatically joined in their daily routine, becoming part of their lives and their families. This was a tangible example of trust development and acceptance by the rest of the village residents (Berry, 1991; Schippers, et al., 2016).

4.1   Communication and Cooperation with Agencies / Opening up to the Community

One of the first basic actions for the integration of minors was communication with all the agencies of the local community where the centre belonged. A first meeting aimed at getting to know each other with the representatives of the agencies and examined the prospect of entering into cooperation. Health and education services came first. An excellent cooperation was established with the local health centre. Each and every minor on their arrival they were referred to the Health Centre to do a preventive medical check-up. From then on, they had the right of free medical treatment, either at the Health Centre or at the General Hospitals of Heraklion. Following the frequent contacts of the social worker, the medical and administrative staff of the hospitals became soon acquainted with some of the minors, who accompanied others, on a role of a mediator in the absence of an interpreter. They were trained as centre assistants and they catered immediately to the medical needs of the younger newcomers.

The social worker came into contact with local community schools, i.e. the village middle and high schools. In sequence to the first meeting to get to know each other, many other regular meetings with the principals and the educational staff followed, to deal with the process of school enrolment of the minors, monitoring their progress, dealing with the emerging difficulties and obstacles and raising awareness of the school community about their inclusion. It is worth noting that some youths, with diligence and perseverance, excelled in their classes, even though they learned the Greek language during their stay at the Reception Centre. The school inclusion and attendance of some minors in high school was followed by a first direct action between the guests and the local students. During the Christmas season, the youths organized a party at the Centre, where the students of the 3rd grade of the local High School were invited, as they were the same age as those residing at the Centre.

There was also an excellent cooperation between the Refugee's Centre social worker and the one of the Open Centre for the Protection of the Elderly of Anogeia, which from the beginning was very positive in terms of hosting minor refugees. After a joint proposal and agreement between the two, a carnival party was organized for the first time in Anogeia with the cooperation of all local bodies, which, apart from the creation of the floats, it included common theatrical and dance events. This action gave the minors the opportunity to get closer to residents of all ages, to get to know each other, to exchange cultural elements, to show off their artistic skills, to receive acceptance and feedback, as this successful project required the willingness of all participants of several afternoon hours for rehearsals on the premises of the Elderly's centre. In addition, the fact that the minors took over the artistic curation of the street chariots and the scenery of the theatrical events contributed to the enthusiastic acceptance and recognition by the inhabitants. During the same period, their actions also coincided with their participation in the cultural events in Aridaia, a city located outside of Crete in the Northern Western part of the country, where the long-hour rehearsals of the actions (songs, Afghan and Cretan dances, theatrical acts), which were planned in advance, where presented. By travelling to participate in this festival, the recognition and acceptance of their effort

helped both the bonding of the team and the development of confidence between the minors, the social worker and the rest of the staff.

4.2 The Contribution of University Institutions

Another important step that was taken immediately after the start of the social worker's cooperation with the Centre, was to include a cooperation agreement with the Social Work Department of the Technological Educational Institute of Crete (currently, the Hellenic Mediterranean University), in which she was also working as a part time lecturer and had the opportunity to supervise students on their practice placement. The students collaborated with community agencies and contributed to essential acquaintance, interaction and mutual respect with the residents by tackling prejudices and promoting the social integration of minors.

The Centre also accepted student social workers from other countries for their internship through the Erasmus program, which made both parties happy, as the students had the opportunity to come into contact with unaccompanied minors and have a unique experience. The minors, on the other hand, had the opportunity to expand their contacts, feel accepted and enrich their program with new actions. In the context of this collaboration, professors and researchers from abroad visited the Centre while "Art Therapy" seminars were also held. In addition, the Centre offered the possibility of internships to students from the Department of Psychology of the University of Crete, thus providing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

4.3 Cooperation with Organizations and Institutions outside the Community

Collaborations with agencies from the other prefectures of Crete, contacts with schools of primary and secondary education, with the Immigrant Shelter in Chania, with theatre and other groups of the country led to the exchange of visits with schools. The youths' participation in anti-racist festivals, cultural celebrations and cultural camping, Olympic Games camps, art workshops, music workshops related to Afghan music, friendly soccer matches, health education seminars by NGOs, UNHCR world refugee days, etc. was critical for the integration process. At the same time, regular educational excursions were organized throughout the island, where young people were given the opportunity to get to know the place that was hosting them, to interact with other people, but also to have fun.

4.4 Local Community Support and Rehabilitation

Seasonal employment in agricultural and cultural work, or permanent employment in shops and cooperatives in the community for those above the age of 17, and their access to education in local schools, as well as their participation in the local football team and their learning of dances, musical instruments and martial arts from volunteers, were significant for the integration process. They were also invited to local celebrations, ceremonies and events by the residents, with some of whom they had developed very close, family-like, relationships. All of the above contributed to the minors feeling safe. They were, thus, helped to develop special abilities and skills and believe in the possibilities and integration prospects they had (Berry, 1991; Kohli, 2007; Tonheim et al., 2015; Schippers, et al., 2016).

A serious deficit on the part of state institutions was the care for the future of minors when they came of age and had to leave the Centre. This created insecurity (McDonald, 2016). Thus, the social worker's particular concern was to empower them and strengthen their resilience, taking care as much as she could of any details related to their vocational rehabilitation during their adulthood (Hodes et al., 2008; Kohli, 2007; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Rigby, 2011; Wade et al., 2012). Although a proposal was sent to the Labor Force Employment Organization for their youths' inclusion in professional training and employment programs, there was not much success, as this was not provided for in the legislation at the time. Yet by looking for local advertisements, the social worker helped them in finding jobs in the nearest cities of Heraklion and Rethymnon, as well as in the local community of Anogeia.

4.5   Difficulties Encountered

Throughout this project, there were many difficulties related to the institutional and legislative framework and many problems were encountered by the minors due to psychological transitions and the emergence of crises due to their traumatic past and their removal from their family and homeland. They often experienced frustrations, mainly from delays in granting political asylum (Kohli, 2007) or from negative decisions (rejections) related to their asylum applications. A continuous agitation was frequent due to the insufficient outlet for utilizing free time which was offered by the infrastructures, while tensions and frictions between them evolved in any cohabitation and especially among teenagers.

Listening carefully while using crisis intervention skills and assisting youths to vent additional frustration were some of the skills used within counselling social work sessions. The aim was also to assist them in setting their own goals and empower them towards a new start in their lives through an individually scheduled programme for each and every one of them. Planned group work sessions aimed to develop a sense of "belonging", increase their feeling secure, their co-operative skills and group cohesion, as expanding solidarity and mutual support among youths was a clear purpose.

In cases, which were difficult to manage and needed psychiatric care, support by the hospitals of Heraklion was asked and a continuous close co-operation with psychologists and psychiatrists was established. These mental health experts regularly met some youths, until a psychologist was hired on a permanent basis at the Centre.

The efforts made by professionals and volunteers, as well as the role of the local community, were decisive in strengthening the youth's resilience, empowering them and contributing to their successful integration in the community.

4.6   The Embrace of the Local Community

Anogeia may be a closed and remote mountain community, but in relation to an impersonal big city, it managed to offer the minors a first safe and protective environment and the possibility of developing authentic relationships that they need so much. After the great suffering and the countless dangers and traumas they went through, the Anogeia local community embraced them. The acceptance and love of the residents towards the guests dispelled their suspicion and softened any resistance. They gradually healed their trauma and pushed them to regain trust in themselves and

people; the local residents offered them again the hope they had lost, a new vision and the supplies they needed to build their lives responsibly and freely in the future. This did not happen immediately, but it developed gradually. The initial persons in their new life, who were residents of Anogeia, the workers at the Centre, the local priest, as well as renowned musicians of the village, acting as "integration mediators", took them in their homes, invited them along, alongside with the locals, to all social events of the community (local cafes, weddings, parties, etc.) and asked them to join them in the local sports clubs, etc. This event softened any resistance on behalf of the locals and, following the "unwritten rules of hospitality" that want "your guest to be our guest", they followed the example of their fellow villagers, and embraced them all, as if they were their own children. A typical example of how the residents of Anogeia treated minors as real family is the following: A woman villager, who was a member of the Centre's security staff, offered a handmade silk scarf[4], which is a precious gift with a special symbolic value in Cretan culture, to two of "her children", (as she used to call them) for a wedding and a funeral. One scarf, she offered to a boy who was killed in a car accident. She placed the scarf in the coffin and said: "This is to accompany you on your long 'journey' back to Afghanistan." The other scarf was given as a wedding gift for 'good luck'. She put it on the groom's shoulder during the wedding ceremony, where she also became the couple's best woman. In both cases this woman has not only embraced the youths with a spirit of hospitality but she has also "adopted" the role of a Cretan mother, originating from "Anogeia", as she performed the traditional custom of offering a handmade silk scarf to "her own children".

The acceptance of minors by the local community is also demonstrated by UNHCR's choice to organize the World Refugee Day celebration in 2004 in Anogeia in order to honour the work of the Reception Centre. As the then High Commissioner stated in a press conference (UNHCR, 2004a, b in Oikonomou, 2020), *"Hospitality in Anogeia is no accident: the warmth with which the local community has embraced the children is a bright example of humanity and culture* (UNHCR, 2004b in Oikonomou, 2020: 419) *[…] The Greek government and Greece have given the unaccompanied refugee children a place to call home, here in Anogeia".* (UNHCR, 2004a in Oikonomou, 2020: 417).

This was also verified by a quote from an interview with the youths hosted in the Anogeia Reception Centre to the High Commissionaire (UNHCR, 2004a in Oikonomou, 2020). Their gratitude could not be better expressed than by arguing the children's own "reasoning":

> "We were children without a family, without a country, without a future. However, our God had taught us to always see a bright sun behind the clouds. And this sun was for us your country, Greece that hosted us. Here we got a warm embrace, security, people around us who trust and love us. Now we sleep without nightmares and bomb blasts to disturb us. We loved this place, we learned your language, we learned to make friends, to trust people

---

[4] The modern knitted scarf (sari), or bolidi, with its dense, teardrop-like fringes made its appearance in the 20th century. Its fringes symbolize the many years of Turkish rule in Crete and the sadness and mourning caused by the holocaust of the Monastery in Arkadi in 1866. It is woven in two embroidered colors: white and black. White is usually worn on happy occasions, such as weddings and christenings, while black shows valour, pride and mourning (Choustoulakis, 2021).

again and to gain their appreciation every day. We got our own courage back and we dream about the future: a house, a job, a homeland" (UNHCR, 2004a in Oikonomou, 2020: 417).

5   Reflective Thoughts on Social Work's Role with Unaccompanied Minors

Social work interventions based on the principles of human rights and social justice with the holistic use of the methodology of social work, influenced by a critical perspective and anti-oppressive methods, empowerment, strengthening of resilience, emancipation and integration of unaccompanied asylum seekers, formed a positive climate in the Reception Centre which was also established by staff members. Locals were occasionally invited to various events in the Centre and, thus, alliances with institutions and services within the local and wider community were created. Practical, day-to-day support and creating routines for minors helped promoting a sense of "coherence". The emphasis on "coming into terms" with the youths' traumas, when they felt ready, provided the context for a more emotional space with them, i.e. the realm of "connection" based on a strong and lasting relationship with the development of strong bonds and "coherence" (Kohli, 2007).

The social worker was able to develop an honest relationship with them, by presenting real and genuine interest, patience, consistency and feedback (Arnold & Collins, 2010-2011; Nair, 2013; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). Gaining their trust helps them to break their silence, which was frequently used as a form of resistance (Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2006). There is frequently strong suspicion on behalf of minors towards social workers, as they are often perceived as "authorities" (see Chase, 2010; Kohli, 2006; McDonald, 2016; Okitikpi & Aymer, 2003). Youths' reluctance to trust professionals often leads to silence (Kohli, 2006). Empathic and congruent listening and respect for their personality, principles and values, as well as simultaneously recognizing and apologizing for potential mistakes and weaknesses on her part, led to a strong professional/counselling relationship and encouraged the social worker to deal with the countless difficulties emerging. Furthermore, their increasing resilience emerging from their competence of surviving and their will to live was a compass to the working process. Most importantly, it should never be forgotten that they are young people and they thus should be treated as any other young person who needs support and empowerment to rely on their own strengths and move forward in their lives.

Working in partnership, empowering them ("power with" clients) rather than controlling them ("power over" clients), and treating them as experts in their own lives was essential. Empowerment allowed them to feel part of the decision-making process on serious issues that affected them, taking responsibility for their survival rather than just being considered as passive victims (Nair, 2013; Wade et al., 2003). The fact that these young people decided to leave their homelands at an early age to seek a better and safe future in a foreign country should be recognized as a "strength" (Corcoran, 2012; McCashen, 2007; Saleebey, 2014). This approach, instead of focusing on the problems of minors, seeks to understand and develop their strengths and abilities, which can turn their lives into something positive through encouragement and by focusing attention on their strengths and competences, thus, pushing them to develop a positive image of themselves (Saleebey, 2014). This framework places emphasis on the discovery,

affirmation and enhancement of the individuals' capacities, interests, knowledge, resources and goals (Cederbaum & Klusaritz, 2009, in Mathe, 2018).

The feedback received from this whole venture has been possible as contact and communication have been maintained with several of the minors, who are now scattered in many countries all around the world. Some have even gone back to Afghanistan. They still communicate with the social worker, they talk about the families they have created, about their work, about their life and still refer with nostalgia to their overall experiences of what they had lived in Anogeia. At the first opportunity, when it is possible, they visit Crete and Anogeia, specifically "It is as if we are returning to our own homeland", argued one of them (Oikonomou, 2020).

Many scholars (see Gray & Elliott, 2001; Schippers, et al., 2016) argued that the successful settlement and integration of unaccompanied minors and the assurance of their mental health in the host country are critically associated with the process enabling them to become members of the so-called "host community" and their developing of a sense of "belonging". A prerequisite to this is that they are given the possibilities and opportunities to receive care and feel safe through their relationship with adults, to share their stories and experiences through the development of acquaintances and friendly relationships, to participate in decision making for their steps to maturity and their social inclusion to education, activities and networking, which enhances their skill development, mental empowerment and health prospects (Schippers, et al., 2016). Berry (1991) reinforces this view, arguing that people are able to successfully integrate into a society and they are considered resilient to change when they are able to rebuild support and care networks over time. After all, after leaving their homeland, permanent residence in one place also provides the stability that children and youths seek and need (Kohli, 2007: 143).

Social support and social relationships have a decisive impact on the psychosocial well-being of youths and adults. Those who are more socially isolated or less socially integrated are consequently less, socially, psychologically and physically healthy. Social support can involve practical help and assistance in the daily life of the unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. It is also essential in providing emotional support and security. Minors who have been exposed to situations of risk as they have been on the move, away from their parents (or they may not have parents at all), benefit especially from the presence of supportive adults in the host country in terms of their successful integration into the local society. The development of such a secure relationship and bonding can help them regain their trust in themselves and in others (Tonheim et al., 2015). Making them feel as 'children and youths' first of all is critical and essential, and it was a primary consideration in the Anogeia Reception Centre. As the minors hosted in the Centre felt like the 'staff's own children', they still consider the Village as their second homeland and, even as adults, they always return to it happily.

The following phrase of an adult refugee fifteen years later, which captures his love for the place that hosted him, is quite unique, yet typical of the way the hosted minors feel: *"I will not tell you in a few words, I will tell you in one word. When people ask me where I'm from, I say that I am of Afghan-Anogeian-Cretan origin"* (Oikonomou, 2020: 224).

6   In Conclusion

Social work with unaccompanied minors emphasizes dealing with the emerging challenges and focuses on strengthening youths' resilience with genuine concern, love and empathy. Through information providing, careful empathetic listening and working in partnership, social work addresses young people's needs. Furthermore, it involves empowering youths and promoting social justice and social change while developing professionals' critical self-awareness, mediating children's and youths' rights within the hosting community and managing the emerging problems and difficulties presented (Fook, 2003; Kandylaki, 2009). The mediating role is particularly essential in a period of increasing immigration and neoliberal reorganization of national welfare states, which creates new conceptual, ethical and practical challenges for social work practices (Jönsson & Kojan, 2017: 301-317).

During this period of emerging complex, and constantly changing, conditions, both at the institutional and at the socio-political-economic level, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are faced with ever-increasing new needs that require immediate management. Social workers are called to respond to new challenges, which require the critical evaluation and reconsideration of previously acquired knowledge, the exercise of criticism and evaluation of the environment in which they appear and the enrichment of existing processes with new overall planning and practices (Fook, 2018).

Based on critical social work and critical reflection in regards to their feelings and prejudices, their strengths and weaknesses, their developing knowledge and skills, cultural competence and sensitivity for the target group, social workers need to intervene holistically by making an overall contribution in meeting the needs of the children's daily life, recognizing the traumas of the past in order to make them feel that they really belong in the new country so that their goals can be achieved in the future.

In this context, social workers need to develop abilities and skills for honest and open communication, to listen carefully and highlight the "reason" of minors, planning and acting with them to improve their living conditions, to create and maintain honest relationships that respect the uniqueness of the "other" (Campbell & Baikie, 2012), to develop "cultural competence", recognizing the values and attitudes of those served, understanding and showing respect, both to their particular culture and to their history and experiences, as they belong to, and are members of, a wider oppressed group (Kandylaki, 2009; Thompson, 2001). Most importantly, however, they should never forget that unaccompanied minors are, above all, "children" and "youths" with all the characteristics and particularities of those specific age groups.

"Cultural competence" does not simply refer to new knowledge and skills in terms of cultural otherness, but presupposes the reconsideration of social work in terms of its goals and values, as well as the development of a more reflective attitude towards experiences, assumptions, the skills of professionals and feelings related to stereotypes and prejudices (Sue, 2006). Knowing and recognizing their personal values and attitudes, through self-awareness, significantly determines the integrity and quality of their interventions (Kallinikaki, 2011).

The development of skills and the utilization of all intervention methods of social work, following an objective assessment of environmental conditions, as well as social

workers' networking with institutions, services and initiative movements aimed at the collective assertion of rights for the empowerment of vulnerable social groups, lead to their more effective intervention. By taking into consideration the role that the local community can play in the integration of unaccompanied minors and their access to local agencies and services, social workers' develop networks with informal community leaders to increase awareness-raising and defend social justice. It is also essential to come up with suggestions for policy changes, which are, in fact, necessary in order to redefine their role and their responsibilities in the field (Oikonomou, 2011).

The current system finds it difficult to respond effectively to the questions and dilemmas that arise in regards to child protection, and professionals are called upon to reflect on the conditions for the inclusion of unaccompanied minors, to raise new concerns and submit sustainable proposals. Social workers can be actively involved in policy changes and interventions, research and direct practices in order to effectively contribute to the self-determination of unaccompanied minors. By being active in developing strategies of resistance to neoliberal practices that favour control over the active participation of those directly concerned and by simultaneously promoting active professional reflection and maintaining an emotional connection to experience (Beddoe, 2010; Bogen & Marlowe, 2015; Williams & Briskman, 2015), social workers may become actively involved in mainstream debates about organizational goals for unaccompanied minors and political asylum seekers. This may help to support institutions' survival in competitive environments. The forced movement of populations and their integration, especially that of the unaccompanied minors, continues to be one of the most challenging global issues that social work is faced with. Individual empowerment along with collective responsibility and advocacy of social justice are essential for social work with unaccompanied minors as it has been exemplified and shown in detail hereby, through the presentation of the case study of the 'critical best practice' of the Anogeia Reception Centre.

References

Adams, R., Dominelli, L. & Payne, M. (2009). *Critical practice in social work.* Macmillan Publishers.

Allan, J. (2003). "Practising critical social work". In J. Allan, B. Pease, & L. Briskman (Eds.), *Critical social work. An introduction to theories and practices* (pp. 52-72). Allen and Unwin.

Arnold, S., & Collins L.S. (2011). *Closing a Protection Gap. National Report 2010-2011.* Irish Refugee Council. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326266027_Closing_a_Protection_Gap_Irish_National_Report_2010-2011

Baines, D. (2007). *Doing anti-oppressive practice. Building transformation politicized social work.* Fernwood Publishing.

Beddoe, L. (2010). Surveillance or reflection. Professional supervision in 'the risk society'. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(4), 1279–1296.

Berry, J. W. (1991). Refugee adaptation in settlement countries. An overview with an emphasis on primary prevention. In F. L Ahern. & J. L. Athey. (Eds.). *Refugee children. Theory, research and services*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bogen, R., & Marlowe, J. (2015). Asylum discourse in New Zealand. Moral panic and a culture of indifference. *Australian Social Work, 70*(1), 1-12.

Breen, D. (2019). *Desperate journeys. January to September 2019.* United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Brown, K., & Rutter, L. (2008). *Critical thinking for social work.* www.learningmatters.co.uk

Campbell, C. (2003). Principles and practices of anti-oppressive pedagogy as represented by Dr. Terri Swice" In W. Shera (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 393-411). Canadian Scholars Press.

Campbell, C., & Baikie, G. (2012). Beginning at the beginning. An exploration of critical social work. *Critical Social Work, 13*(1), 67-81.

Carniol, B. (2005). *Case critical: Social services and social justice in Canada.* Between the Lines.

Chase, E. (2010). Agency and silence. Young People Seeking Asylum Alone in the UK. *British Journal of Social Work 40*(7), 2050–2068.

Cederbaum, J., & Klusaritz, H. A. (2009). Clinical instruction. Using the strengths-based approach with nursing students. *Journal of Nursing Education 48*(8), 423-424.

Choustoulakis, G. (2021). *The black Cretan shirt, the Cretan sariki and the Cretan knife.* CRETAN magazine. https://www.cretanmagazine.gr/to-mavro-kritiko-poukamiso-to-kritiko-sariki-ke-to-kritiko-macheri/

Corcoran, J. (2012). *Helping skills for social work direct practice*. Oxford University Press.

Creswell, W. J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design. Choosing among five traditions*. SAGE.

Dominelli, L. (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Ferguson, H. (2003). Outline of a critical best practice. Perspectives on social work and social care. *British Journal of Social Work, 33*(8), 1005–1024.

Ferguson, I., Ioakimidis, V., & Lavalette, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Global social work in a political context. Radical Perspectives.* Policy Press.

Fook, J. (2002). *Social work. Critical theory and practice.* Sage Publications.

Fook, J. (2003). Qualitative social work. Research and practice. *Critical Social Work. The Current Issues, 2*, 123.

Fook, J. (2016). *Social work. A critical approach to practice.* Sage.

Fook, J. (2018). Critical reflection in counseling and social work. In Kandylaki, A. (Ed.). *Social work, cultural otherness & critical reflection* (pp. 43-59). Topos.

Giannou, D. (2012). *An introduction to critical social work.* https://socialworkaction.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/criticalsw.pdf

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for qualitative research.* Aldine.

Gray, A. & Elliott, S. (2001). *Refugee resettlement research project 'Refugee Voices'. Literature Review*. New Zealand Immigration Service.

Healy, K. (2001). *Reinventing critical social work. Challenges from practice, context and postmodernism.* University of Windsor, Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Sociology.

Healy, K. (2005). *Social work theories in context.* Palgrave MacMillan.

Hick, S., & Pozzuto, R. (2005). Introduction. Towards 'becoming' a critical social worker. In S. Hick, J. Fook, & R. Pozzuto (Eds.), *Social work. A critical turn* (pp. ix-xviii). Thompson Education Publishing.

Hodes, M., Jagdev, J., Chandra, N., & Cunniff, A. (2008). Risk and resilience for psychological distress amongst unaccompanied asylum seeking adolescents. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Child Psychiatry, 49*(77), 723–732.

IFSW, & IASSW. (2014). *Global definition of social work.* https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

Ioakimidis, B. (2011). *Social work and social disobedience (or else, I'm not paying your taxes and duties!).* http://socialworkaction.wordpress.com/2011/09/18/

Jönsson, J. H., & Kojan, H. B. (2017). Social justice beyond welfare nationalism. Challenges of increasing immigration to Sweden and Norway. *Critical and Radical Social Work, 5*(3), 301–317.

Kamali, M. (2015). *War, violence and social justice. Theories for social work.* Ashgate.

Kallinikaki, Th. (2011). *Introduction to the theory and practice of Social Work.* Topos.

Kandylaki, A., & Kallinikaki, Th. (2018). Critical, anti-oppressive and human rights social work in the 'rough pathways' of the Muslim Roma neighbourhoods in Thrace. Towards inclusion in education. *British Journal of Social Work, 48*(6), 1559–1575.

Kandylaki, A. (2009). *Social Work in a Multicultural Environment.* Topos

Kandylaki, A. (2018). Critical approach and critical reflection in social work education and interventions in a multicultural environment (pp. 13-41). In A. Kandylaki (Ed.). *Social Work, cultural otherness & critical reflection.* Topos.

Kohli, R. K. S. (2006). The sound of silence. Listening to what unaccompanied asylum-seeking children say and do not say. *The British Journal of Social Work, 36*(5), 707-721.

Kohli, R. K. S. (2007). *Social Work with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kohli, R. K. S., & Mather, R. (2003). Promoting psychological well-being in unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the UK. *Child & Family Social* Work, 8(3), 201-212.

Lacroix, M. (2006). Social work with asylum seekers in Canada. The case for social justice. *International Social Work, 49*(1), pp. 19-28

Leonard, P. (2001). The future of critical social work in uncertain conditions. *Critical Social Work*, *2*(1).

Liddell, H., & Scott, R. (2006). *Dictionary of the Greek language.* Translation X. Moschos. Pelekanos.

Mathe, M. (2018). *Experiences, challenges and coping strategies of unaccompanied migrant children in South Africa. Guidelines for social work.* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of South Africa.

McCashen, W. (2007). *The strengths approach. A strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. St Luke's Innovative Resources.

McDonald, K. (2016). *The social networks of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the transition to adulthood* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of York.

Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis. An expanded sourcebook*. Sage.

Mullaly, B. (2007). *The new structural social work.* Oxford University Press.

Nair, C. (2013). *Separated and unaccompanied children placed in care. Perspectives and experiences of professionals working in Sweden* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Gothenburg University.

Newbigging, K., & Thomas, N. (2011). Good practice in social care for refugee and asylum seeking children, *Child Abuse Review* 20(5), 374–390.

Nikolopoulos P. (2018). The institution of guardianship of unaccompanied minor refugees. *Law Magazine SYNIGOROS (Nomiki Vivliothiki), 127*, 47-49.

O' Sullivan, T. (1999). *Decision-Making in Social Work.* Palgrave.

Oikonomou, A. (2011). Social work and unaccompanied children and children who have been separated from their families. The case of the Reception Center for Minor Refugees of the National Youth Foundation in Anogeia, Crete (pp. 123-138). In Parlalis, S. (Ed.) *The practical applications of social work in Greece and Cyprus.* Athens: Pedio.

Oikonomou, A. (2020). Social Work and unaccompanied child asylum seekers. *Challenges, difficulties and opportunities through the reasoning of the professionals and of themselves.* Doctoral thesis in Greek]. Democritus University of Thrace.

Okitikpi, T., & Aymer, A. (2003). Social work with African refugee children and their families. *Child and Family Social Work, 8*(3), 213–22.

Östman, C. (2019). *Unaccompanied refugee minors and political responses in Sweden. Challenges for social work* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Mid Sweden University.

Payne, M., Adams, R., & Dominelli, L. (2002). Values in social work. Contested entities with enduring qualities. In R. Adams, L. Dominelli, & M. Payne (Eds.). *Critical practice in social work* (pp. 1-12). Palgrave.

Petit, M. J. (2005). *Rights of the Child. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the trafficking of children, child prostitution and child pornography.* Economic and Social Council. Commission on Human Rights. In Oikonomou, A. (2020), *Social work. Challenges, difficulties and*

opportunities through the reasoning of the professionals and of themselves (pp. 429-434). Doctoral thesis; in Greek, Democritus University of Thrace.

Rigby, P. (2011). Separated and trafficked children. The challenges for child protection professionals. *Child Abuse Review 20*(5), 324–340.

Saleebey, D. (2014). Introduction. Power in people. In D. Saleebey (Ed.), *The strength perspective in Social Work practice* (pp. 1-24). Pearson.

Schippers, M., Van de Pol, P., De Wildt, L., Thys, K., Larsen, M., Massoumi, Z., & Rozumek, M. (2016). *Alternative Family Care (ALFACA). Handbook for professionals working with foster families and unaccompanied minors hosted in them.* Nidos, Danish Red Cross, Jugendhilfe Süd-Niedersachsen, Minor-Ndako, Organization for Aid to Refugees.

Seelig, J. M. (1991). Social work and the critical thinking movement. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 5*(1), 21-34.

Spyropoulou, A.-M. (2016). *Unaccompanied minors as refugees and migrants.* Nomiki Vivliothiki.

Stake, R. E. (1994). *Case studies.* In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 236-247). Sage.

Sue, W. D. (2006). *Multicultural social work practice.* John Wiley.

Thompson, N. (2001). *Anti-discriminatory social work practice.* British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Practical Social Work. Palgrave/Macmillan.

Tonheim, M., Derluyn, I., Vea Rosnes, E., Zito, D., Rota, M, & Steinnes, A. (2015). *Rehabilitation and social reintegration of asylum-seeking children affected by war and armed conflict.* Centre for Intercultural Communication (SIK). Misjonshøgskolens forlag.

Tsovili, Th., & Voutira, E. (2004). *Asylum seeking single women, women head of families and separated children. Reception practices in Greece.* October 2004. UNHCR. https://www.antigone.gr/wp-content/uploads/library/selected-publications-on-migration-and-asylum/greece/en/070427.pdf

UNHCR. (2004a). *Statement by the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.* Press conference during the World Refugee Day events in Crete, Heraklion, June 17, 2004 in Oikonomou

UNHCR. (2004b). Press conference: *Ludovikos of Anogeia at the "Nikos Xylouris" theater. Concert for unaccompanied refugee children in Greece. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity.* Sunday, June 20. World Refugee Day.

Wade, J., Mitchell, F., & Baylis, G. (2003). Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. The Response of Social Work Services. *Child and Family Social Work*, 8(3), 179-189.

Wade, J., Sirriyeh, A., Kohli, R., & Simmonds, J. (2012). *Fostering unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Creating a family life across 'a world of difference'.* British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

Williams, C. & Briskman, L. (2015). Reviving social work through moral outrage. *Critical and Radical Social Work, 3*(1), 3–17.