Bridging Distances

Peer Support for Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers

Laura Natalia Valtonen

University of Helsinki
Faculty of Social Sciences
Development Studies

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Tekijä □– Författare – Author

 Valtonen, <u>Laura</u> Natalia

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic case study on project Safety Net, which provides psychosocial peer support for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in the Helsinki metropolitan area. About 150 underage asylum seekers unaccompanied by family arrive in Finland yearly. Project Safety Net peer tutors visit the group homes that the children live in, and provide an opportunity for them to share their experiences in their own languages. The aims of this research were to understand the circumstances of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, and to gain insight into the ways in which the provided peer support works. This study also critically considers how child asylum seekers are represented in the practices and rhetoric of the Finnish asylum process, and how project Safety Net relates to these representations.

Methods used in this research included participant observation, interviews, and group discussions. The data was analyzed thematically and systematically. For unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, factors that increase the need for support were found to be separation from family, the inherent temporariness of the asylum seeker status and a concern for the future, language difficulties, a feeling of isolation, and developmental issues related to adolescence.

The weekly visits from Safety Net peer tutors was found to be significant in providing support. This research shows that Safety Net peer tutors have many different roles through which peer support works. As friends, they offer a change to the daily routines of group home life and are trusted confidants. Often they take on the role of a family member. They may also act as spokespersons on the children's behalf, while also offering advice on how to navigate in the Finnish society. They can be significant role models as people who have once been refugees themselves and have successfully adapted to the Finnish society.

Elements that make project Safety Net successful were found to be most importantly the use of the children's own languages, a communal nature within the project, and the shared experience of being a refugee. Peer tutors also experienced benefits from working in the project.

The analysis of refugee representations uncovered certain distancing and silencing practices such as the isolated placement of the asylum seekers, bureaucratic expression, and the representation of asylum seekers as essentially untrustworthy. Safety Net was found to offer several significant counter-representations, notwithstanding the fact that it is not completely immune to the prevailing political representations.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

 Refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, peer support

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tämä tutkielma on etnografinen tapaustutkimus Tukiverkko-projektista, joka tarjoaa psykososiaalista vertaistukea yksin maahan tulleille turvapaikanhakijalapsille kahdessa pääkaupunkiseudulla sijaitsevassa alaikäisyksikössä. Suomeen saapuu vuosittain n. 150 alaikäistä turvapaikanhakijaa ilman huoltajiaan tai muita aikuisia. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli ymmärtää yksin tulleiden alaikäisten turvapaikanhakijoiden elämäntilanteen erityispiirteitä, analysoida millä tavoin vertaistuki vaikuttaa suhteessa näihin erityispiirteisiin sekä mitkä tekijät tukevat tai estävät vertaistuen toteutumista. Toisena tavoitteena oli tarkastella sitä, minkälaisia representaatioita turvapaikanhakijalapsista konstruoidaan turvapaikkaprosessissa, ja mikä Tukiverkon asema on suhteessa näihin representaatioihin.

Tärkeimpinä menetelminä käytettiin osallistuvaa havainnointia alaikäisyksiköissä, ryhmäkeskusteluita ja haastatteluita. Aineisto analysoitiin temaattisesti ja systemaattisesti. Merkittävimpinä yksin tulleiden turvapaikanhakijoiden tuen tarvetta lisäävinä tekijöinä voidaan pitää eroa perheestä, turvapaikanhakuprosessin aiheuttamaa väliaikaisuutta ja huolta tulevaisuudesta, kielivaikeuksia, eristyneisyyden tunnetta sekä nuoruuden kehitysvaiheeseen liittyviä kysymyksiä.

Tutkimuksessa todettiin, että Tukiverkon vertaistukiohjaajien viikoittaiset vierailut tarjoavat tärkeää tukea. Vertaistukiohjaajilla on useita rooleja, joiden kautta psykososiaalinen tuki vaikuttaa. Ystävinä he tarjoavat vaihtelua ryhmäkodin rutiineihin ja mahdollisuuden uskoutua omissa asioissa. Usein heidän nähdään ottavan myös perheenjäsenen kaltaisia rooleja. Vertaistukiohjaajat saattavat myös toimia asiamiehinä lapsille sekä opastaa heitä toimimaan suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa. He voivat olla merkittäviä roolimalleja Suomeen sopeutuneina ihmisinä, jotka ovat itse aikanaan olleet pakolaisia.

Tärkeimmiksi vertaistukea edesauttaviksi tekijöiksi todettiin omakielisyys, projektin sisäinen yhteisöllisyys sekä vertaisuus jaetun pakolaishistorian kautta. Myös vertaistukiohjaajat kokivat hyötyvänsä työskentelystään Tukiverkossa.

Pakolaisrepresentaatioiden tarkastelussa nousi esiin etäännyttäviä käytäntöjä kuten turvapaikanhakijalasten syrjäinen sijoittaminen, byrokraattinen kielenkäyttö sekä turvapaikanhakijoiden esittäminen epäluotettavina. Tukiverkon todettiin tarjoavan useita tärkeitä vastarepresentaatioita, vaikka se ei olekaan täysin irrallaan vallitsevista poliittisista representaatioista.

Contents

If someone shows you who they are, believe them.

Maya Angelou

1 Introduction

In a world of increasing numbers of refugees and displaced people, unaccompanied underage asylum seekers comprise one of the most vulnerable human groups. In addition to having experienced various traumatic events such as violence, war, famine, torture, loss of loved ones, loss of property or terrorism, many have faced a hazardous journey while seeking refuge. Their life situation as asylum seekers is one in which they have to face both these past experiences and the present situation, being separated from their caregivers, while also enduring the process of seeking asylum and a profound uncertainty about the future. Furthermore, they find themselves in a foreign culture and environment, often unable to express themselves in their own language. It is safe to say that unaccompanied minor asylum seekers experience multiple and severe sources of psychosocial stress. (See Alanko et al. 2011.)

There is, therefore, a pressing need for psychosocial support for children in this life situation. Project Safety Net is a Finnish three-year project based on peer support, designed for this purpose. In Finland, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are housed in group homes designated specifically for them, and their daily needs are met by the group home staff. Whereas group home staff represent the Finnish Immigration Service, Project Safety Net is a separate NGO project. Project Safety Net peer tutors have a background similar to that of the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, and they arrive once weekly to provide psychosocial support.

This thesis is a case study hoping to describe and analyze the different aspects and mechanisms found functioning in this kind of psychosocial peer support in the described context. Through participant observation and other qualitative methods, I hope to shed light on the experiences of psychosocial peer support from the perspectives of both the children and the peer tutors. I will also examine some aspects of asylum seeker representations as they are revealed by this case, and consider the role that project Safety Net plays in relation to those representations.

Although the need for support for unaccompanied underage asylum seekers is urgent both in Finland and in all countries receiving asylum seekers, project Safety Net seems to be unique on a worldwide scale. Therefore, hardly any research exists on psychosocial peer support of this kind. One of the objectives of project Safety Net is to create a model for peer support for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, with the aspiration that this model could be applied in other settings both in Finland and elsewhere. An analysis of the experiences with the project can potentially both highlight the urgent need for this kind of support and outline the elements that make peer support work and the obstacles that warrant further development of a peer support model.

In general, previous research on unaccompanied minor asylum seekers concentrates on mental health risks and psychopathology. Peer support has also been studied mainly in a health context, particularly mental illness (Coniglio et al. 2012, Davidson et al. 1999, Corrigan 2006) and programs such as HIV prevention or treatment (Campbell & Mzaidume 2001, Casparian 2004). This research seeks therefore to examine the application of peer support for a different target group.

Furthermore, as immigration and asylum policies are the topic of increasing and passionate political debate (see Pyrhönen 2013), it is important to give scientific consideration to the ways in which unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are encountered, and the kinds of underlying assumptions or representations of refugees that are embedded in the current asylum policies.

My research questions can be summed up as follows: What are the different characteristics of the life situation of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers that psychosocial support is needed for and potentially affects? How does Safety Net peer

support work, and what are its benefits for the parties involved? What features of the project make the peer support process possible, and what hinders it? Finally, what kinds of refugee representations exist within the asylum seeking process, and what is the relationship of project Safety Net to these representations?

In accordance with the research questions, my analysis is two-fold. After setting the context, describing my theoretical framework, methodology, and data, I move on to analyze first the workings of the peer support project. I will then turn to the subject of refugee representations in the context of this case. Throughout the thesis, I will mostly refer to the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers as *children*. The term *peer tutor* refers to Safety Net peer tutors, and *group home staff* to the employees of the group homes.

2 Context

2.1 Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers in Finland

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, asylum seekers are

> […] individuals who have sought international protection and whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined, irrespective of when they may have been lodged (UNCHR 2006).

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are asylum seekers under the age of 18 years who arrive unaccompanied by parents or guardians. There are various possible reasons for this situation: sometimes the child is sent to safety from war or other difficult situations, perhaps in hopes of family reunification at a later time, or the child has lost his/her parents in turmoil or during flight, or he/she has been orphaned. A child can also flee from circumstances of child marriage, religious persecution or a threat of being recruited as a child soldier. Still others have fallen prey to human trafficking. (Mustonen & Alanko 2011.)

The number of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers yearly arriving in Finland varies, but has been relatively stable during the last three years. Between 2010 and 2011 the number plummeted from 329 in 2010 to 150 in 2011 due to changes in age verification procedures and the criteria for family reunification.[1] In 2013, a total of 156 children arrived. The unaccompanied minor asylum seekers that arrived in 2013 were of 31 different nationalities with two stateless applicants and one of unknown nationality. Of all 156 unaccompanied children, 94 came from either Afghanistan (17), Iraq (24), Morocco (17) or Somalia (36).[2] The other 27 nationalities were represented by 1–6 applicants each. The majority of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (80%) were boys. (Finnish Immigration Service 2014c.)

2.2 The Asylum Seeking Process

The process of asylum seeking begins with the asylum seeker asking for asylum upon arrival at the border. The asylum application is submitted either at the border or at a police station to the Finnish Border Guard or the police. A photograph and fingerprints are obtained, and the applicant is placed in a reception center. The identity and the travel route of the applicant are investigated. (Finnish Immigration Service 2014a.)

In the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, the applicant is placed into a reception center specifically meant for underage asylum seekers, or if possible, sometimes also in the care of relatives. The whereabouts of his/her parents and other relatives are looked into, although in practice this is usually very difficult. The district court appoints the applicant a representative, who acts as his/her legal custodian. The representative is present for hearings and other situations where the child's case is

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[1] The new criteria state that the applicant must be underage on the day of receiving the decision on family reunification. Many refugee and child NGO's protested this, because it means that reunification may not occur due to the slow decision process. (Refugee Council b.) Also, as of August 2010, the Immigration Service has had the right to preform forensic age verifications on unaccompanied minors. This has possibly had an impact on the decrease in the number of children arriving in Finland, according to the Immigration Service (2011).
[2] The number of Moroccan nationals grew significantly for both unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers in general, while Afghan, Iraqi and Somali nationals have been among the largest groups consistently.

handled, together with an interpreter and sometimes a legal advisor and/or a social worker. (Refugee Advice Center 2011, Finnish Immigration Service 2014e, Mustonen & Alanko 2011.)

The age of the asylum seeker is crucial, because being under 18 years old means both special living arrangements and some statutory rights. Therefore, the verification of age is an important step in an unaccompanied minor's process, when he/she is close to the age limit and cannot verify his/her age. When there is doubt as to the credibility of the stated age, forensic investigations may be carried out, including dental or bone analyses. (Finnish Immigration Service 2014e) Other possible inquests may include a language examination to determine the applicant's specific dialect. A social worker may be heard about the child's best interests concerning the asylum process. (Mustonen & Alanko 2011.)

Before the asylum application is processed by the Immigration Service, the applicant is investigated by the Dublin Agreement Unit. The Dublin II Regulation

> […] establishes the principle that only one Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application. The objective is to avoid asylum seekers from being sent from one country to another, and also to prevent abuse of the system by the submission of several applications for asylum by one person (Europa Summaries of EU Legislation 2011).

The conditions of the Dublin II Regulation are met if the asylum seeker has a family member with refugee status in another EU country or other members of the agreement (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein or Switzerland); he/she has previously applied for asylum in one or more of these countries; he/she has a visa issued by one of them; or he/she has illegally entered Finland via these countries. If the conditions of the Dublin II Regulation are met, the asylum applicant is ordered to return to the state considered responsible for the asylum process, and entry into Finland is refused. (Finnish

Immigration Service 2014a.) The Dublin protocol is not usually applied to applicants under the age of 14 years (Mustonen & Alanko 2011).[3]

If the Dublin conditions are not met, the application is considered in the Finnish Immigration Service. There are several possible outcomes: asylum, residence permit on different grounds, or refusal of entry. (Finnish Immigration Service 2014a.)

Asylum is granted when the applicant has grounds for fear of religious, political, ethnic or other persecution in his/her country of origin. An underage applicant that is granted asylum then has the right to family unification, which extends to his/her parents and siblings. (Refugee Advice Center 2011.) After being granted asylum, the applicant receives refugee status and a residence permit card (Finnish Immigration Service 2014a).

A residence permit may also be granted based on *subsidiary protection* for individuals that would face the threat of death penalty, torture or other inhumane treatment in the country of origin. A residence permit based on *humanitarian protection* can be granted for persons not facing individual persecution, in the case that the security situation in the country of origin is such that the safety of any individual may be threatened. There are also other grounds for receiving a residence permit, where the individual situation is taken into consideration. Influential factors may include health problems, significant personal bonds in Finland, or other individual circumstances. (Refugee Advice Center 2011.) Upon being granted a residence permit, the applicant receives an alien's passport (Finnish Immigration Service 2014a). Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers that receive asylum or residence permits move either into different group homes in other municipalities or, if old enough, into independent living arrangements (Finnish Immigration Service 2014b).

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[3] The Dublin II regulation was adopted by the European Council in March 2003 and it applies to asylum applications lodged as of September 2003 (UNCHR 2006). It has been criticized, among other adverse consequences, for causing children to be returned to countries with unsatisfactory reception conditions or problematic asylum processes, such as Greece, Italy or Malta (Refugee Advice Center 2011, UNCHR 2006). In Finland, Dublin-based decisions to return asylum applicants to Greece have been ceased from the beginning of 2011. Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers have not been returned to Italy or Malta either. (Finnish Immigration Service 2014d.)

In the case of a negative decision, entry is refused[4], and the applicant is informed and removed from Finland by the police. He/she may appeal the decision in the administrative court. (Finnish Immigration Service 2014a.) The majority of negative decisions for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers have been made on grounds of the Dublin II Regulation. In 2013, a total of 123 decisions were made. Of these, 98 were positive, 11 were negative, 6 of which on Dublin grounds, and 14 were annulled.[5] (Finnish Immigration Service 2014c.)

In 2013, the processing time until the first decision, that is, excluding any appeals processes, was 190 days from lodging the asylum application for all asylum seekers on average (Finnish Immigration Service 2014c). There is no available data on the average time for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers for the year 2013, but the average processing time for unaccompanied minors in 2012 was 329 days (Finnish Immigration Service 2013).

The process described above, together with and experienced in the day-to-day life in the group homes, constitutes the context in which project Safety Net operates. The physical context of this research consists of Harjulinna group home in Siuntio and Espoo group home in Espoo, which were the two minor units in the Helsinki metropolitan area at the time that this research began. The group homes are essentially a waiting station for the children in the process. At the time of research, both homes housed approximately 20 children, with roughly the same amount of staff. The children attended local schools and received municipal health care when needed.

The Harjulinna and Espoo group homes were operated under the Finnish Red Cross and the City of Espoo respectively, but both operated under the Finnish Immigration Service. During the research period, Harjulinna group home was closed down.

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[4] The term *refusal of entry* is used by the Finnish Immigration Service (2014a), although clearly the people concerned have already entered the country.
[5] In 2008, out of a total of 228 decisions, 63 were negative and 50 of those were Dublin cases (Finnish Immigration Service 2009). In 2009, there was a total of 432 total decisions. 165 of these were negative. Of the negative decisions, 139 were Dublin cases (Finnish Immigration Service 2010).

2.3 Project Safety Net

2.3.1 Administration and Funding

Project Safety Net is a three-year project offering psychosocial peer support for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers accommodated in two group homes in the Helsinki Metropolitan area. The project started in June 2012, and will end in May 2015. It is run by The Finnish Refugee Council, a UNHCR associate NGO founded in 1965, which specializes in refugee work in several different countries. Project Safety Net is part of its domestic program, and its staff consists of a project director and a part-time project coordinator, who coordinate the work of more than twenty peer tutors. (Refugee Council c.)

Project Safety Net is mainly funded by the European Refugee Fund with an additional self-financing percentage of 25%. In addition to ERF funding, the project has received small grants from different foundations. The targeted group homes have also committed to a small yearly contribution. Group homes participated in the planning of the project form the start. (Muma 2014a.)

2.3.2 Objectives and Values

Project Safety Net states three distinct and yet intertwined objectives. The first claimed objective is to find people that have once been unaccompanied minor asylum seekers themselves, train them to work as peer tutors, and help them build a mutually supportive network. The second objective is to provide psychosocial support for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in the two group homes in the Helsinki metropolitan area. This support is aimed toward helping the children work through their feelings and offer emotional relief during the asylum process. The third objective is to create a model of the project for future use in other locations and other contexts. (Muma 2014a.)

Values for Project Safety Net were drafted collaboratively by the peer tutors during a training day to form the ethical basis for the project. Quoting from project material entitled The Values and Ethics of a Peer Tutor:

> Respect – We shall value and respect the children and youth and group home staff.
>
> Trust – We shall strive to always be trustworthy and commit to confidentiality concerning private information and in matters related to the asylum process.
>
> Neutrality – We shall not be parties to conflict.
>
> Equality – To us, everyone is equal regardless of age, gender, skin color, ethnic background, religion, or ideology. We shall strive to treat the children equally. We shall not favor any language, gender, or age group.
>
> Benevolence – We shall always strive to think about and act according to the best interest of the children, to support other peer tutors, and to alleviate the work load of group home staff.
>
> Flexibility – We shall take into consideration the wishes of the children and the group homes in the planning and execution of our activities. We shall be flexible with schedules and other matters whenever possible.
>
> Abiding the law – We shall abide by the laws of Finland, international humanitarian law and the rules provided us by group homes. Verbally and through example, we shall encourage others to do the same. (Safety Net, translation mine.)

2.3.3 Training of Peer Tutors

Peer tutors are trained by Safety Net, initially in a two-day peer tutor course, held by another Refugee Council project called Face-to-Face.[6] They are also given the opportunity to attend another Face-to-Face training day on participatory methods. In addition, Safety Net training days are held regularly to offer training, work counseling and a chance to share and bond. (Muma 2014a.)

Some of the themes discussed and learned about in Safety Net training days have included health, the effect of traumatic experiences on development, the asylum process, adolescent sexuality, and adolescent development in general. Training days are also used for reflection on the work of the project and specific cases or problems, as well as the planning and evaluation of special events, such as parties or camps. (Muma 2014a.)

2.3.4 Safety Net in Practice

At the time of research, Safety Net had 23 peer tutors in its network. Between them, they spoke more than 12 languages, in addition to Finnish and English, the main working languages among project staff and peer tutors. What makes peer tutors *peers* for the children is, first, their own background. With few exceptions, peer tutors have a history of being refugees or asylum seekers, and several of them were once unaccompanied minor asylum seekers themselves. Another important element is the fact that they speak the children's own languages. (Muma 2014a.)

A group of one to six peer tutors spends the evening in the group home once a week, Tuesdays in the Siuntio home and Thursdays in the Espoo home. For a visit, a Safety Net peer tutor is paid an hourly fee of 17 Euros and his/her travel expenses are covered. During their visits, Safety Net peer tutors offer the children a chance to share their

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[6] Face-to-Face trains peer tutors and offers different institutions training on managing peer-to-peer groups (Refugee Council a).

thoughts and feelings, usually during the course of shared activities. The wide range of activities has included cooking together, arts and crafts, playing football and other sports, different workshops, practicing Finnish, and fieldtrips to the movies, the theatre, concerts or the library. Safety Net has also held parties for the children and arranged for them to attend camps. (Muma 2014a.)

3 Previous Research

3.1 Children in the Finnish Asylum Process

There is relatively little research on refugee children in Finland. Lähteenmäki (2013) has conducted ethnographic research on asylum seeker children in Finnish reception centers and schools. The informants of this study are children that have arrived with their family, but many of its findings are also applicable to unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. According to Lähteenmäki, child asylum seekers' concerns include recurring fear relating to the past, fear about the future, discrimination, witnessing traumatic events in the reception centers, confusion about the school system, depression or illness of parents, lack of friends, and losing the ones eventually gained. On the other hand, activities, clubs and hobbies are found to be valuable for the coping of the children.

Many of the same themes are found relevant for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers by Alanko, Marttinen, and Mustonen (2011) in a report for an NGO project developing psychosocial expertise and the consideration of the best interest of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. The report includes reflections on the best interest of these children in the asylum process (Taskinen 2011, Tengman & Laakso-Liukkonen 2011, Moghaddam 2011, Martiskainen 2011); effects of war on psychological development (Peltonen 2011); and ways to support unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (Mikkonen 2011).

Another NGO report (Suikkanen 2010) studies tortured and severely traumatized refugee and asylum seeker children in Finland, and assesses their need for psychiatric services. Parsons (2010) assesses the realization of the best interest of the child in decisions concerning refugee and asylum seeker children in a report for the Ombudsman for Minorities. She concludes that more attention is needed toward the safeguarding of asylum seeker children's wellbeing.

3.2 The Psychosocial Wellbeing of Refugees and Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers

The majority of research on the psychosocial wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers focuses on mental health and illness (see Keyes 2000, Pumariega et al. 2005, Kristal-Andersson 2001). According to Tempany (2009), a multidisciplinary interest in refugee mental health has grown significantly with a growing view that when encountering refugees, mental health care is a central priority once other basic needs have been met.

There is some consensus that refugees as a group have a high risk for psychological problems, although this too has been questioned (see Brough et al. 2003, Angel et al. 2001). Special psychological stressors for refugees include experiences of war, famine, natural disasters, torture and displacement. Some common psychological issues mentioned are PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder), depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide. (Tempany 2009, Silove et al. 1997.) While many adverse experiences have often occurred in the country of origin and/or during the journey, refugees may also encounter special hardships in the destination country (Silove et al. 1997).

In fact, sources of distress for refugees have also been categorized chronologically into pre-flight, flight, and post-flight stressors. Post-flight stressors, including policies of detention in destination countries, have received increasing attention. Common post-flight experiences such as boredom and limited access to work have been found to have

adverse effects on wellbeing and to exacerbate the effects of previous trauma. (Watters & Ingleby 2004.)

Refugee children are a special group within refugees, and they, too, have been studied mostly in terms of mental health risks. In addition to issues such as anxiety and depression, behavioral problems are another topic of interest in the context of adolescents and children. Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers often face several of the aforementioned stressors that other refugees do, but are additionally, by definition, affected by the fact that they have been separated from family. (Ajduković 1998, Bean et al. 2007, Derluyn 2007.)

Bean and her colleagues (2007) compared the severity of psychological distress of unaccompanied minor refugees with that of refugee children accompanied by family. They found that, in accordance with the view that absence of parental relationships increases vulnerability (Masten et al. 1990), unaccompanied refugees reported significantly higher rates of psychopathology than their accompanied peers. Gaytán, Carhill, and Suárez-Orozco (2007) also report that separation from family has a significant impact on the mental health of underage refugees. In Finland, research into the psychological wellbeing of refugee and asylum seeker children has been conducted by Sourander (1998, 2003) and Punamäki (2001).

Adaptation and integration are also important research interests. In the Finnish immigration research since the 1990's these concepts have been brought together under the word *kotoutuminen,* which derives from the word home. It translates best as integration, and is seen to cover economic, social, cultural and other aspects of adapting into the new society. Finnish integration research has focused mainly on employment issues and economic status. (See Perhoniemi & Jasinskaja-Lahti 2007 for a review of this research.)

Another concept, acculturation, refers to a "complex pattern of continuity and change in how people go about their lives in the new society" (Berry 1997). In the refugee context, acculturation is often referred to in terms of acculturation stress or different types of acculturation strategies (Brough et al. 2003, Berry 1997). It is frequently thought that refugees have less incentive to strive for rapid acculturation than the

immigrants that emigrate voluntarily in pursuit of economic or other possibilities (Gibson 2001). Acculturation can also be hindered by traumatic histories (Djuraskovic & Arthur 2009).

The acculturation viewpoint has been increasingly criticized, mostly from a postcolonial stance, which highlights hybrid histories and complex identities in the globalized world. Critique is aimed at the universalizing linear processes that acculturation studies suggest. The psychological self is separated from culture, which is seen as a mere variable that affects the display of certain behavior, whereas the psyche is something primary, universal and natural. Therefore, it is assumed in acculturation theories, that all immigrants portray the same psychological processes in the course of immigration. A postcolonial critique argues that selfhood must be seen as deeply interwoven into political, cultural and historical factors. The separation of self and culture also serves to hide the questions of power and race that should be seen as central issues when thinking about immigration. (Bhatia & Ram 2001.)

Also, acculturation theory has been criticized for its assumption of a clear-cut separation between the original culture of the immigrant and the new one. The assumption is, that an acculturating immigrant moves mentally from one place to another in a linear and universal way. At the same time, culture becomes linked with nation in a problematic way. A postcolonial viewpoint suggests instead, that migrant identities be seen as situational, hybrid, contested, and process-like. (Bhatia & Ram 2001.)

3.3 Transcultural Psychiatry, Resilience, and Support

Researching the wellbeing of refugees inevitably evokes central questions of transcultural psychology and psychiatry, although certainly not all research explicitly addresses these questions. A critical discussion of both Western psychiatry itself (see Dean 2012, Gronfein 2007, Tempier 2010), and the implications of imposing it onto individuals from different cultures (Kleinman 1991, Watters 2001), is gaining ground.

Concepts such as trauma, and diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress syndrome are widespread within the literature on the wellbeing of refugees, but their validity has been questioned. Summerfield (2008) argues that biological criteria for mental diagnoses are rare, and that mental health is essentially a cultural construct. He claims that psychiatric diagnoses reflect Western trends in thinking. As an example, for DSM III (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), adopted in 1980, the diagnosis of homosexuality was expunged, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was installed.

Using Western psychiatric concepts as starting points for studying the wellbeing of refugees can therefore be questioned. In her review on the research on the mental wellbeing of Sudanese refugees, for example, Tempany (2009, 311) finds that authors differ in

> […] their interpretations of the source of distress, for example, as psychopathology due to past trauma according to the biomedical model of PTSD, or as a normal reaction to a combination of past and present stressors,

some finding the conceptualizing of psychological distress in Western medical terms unsatisfactory in the Sudanese cultural context.

Hjern and Jeppsson (2005) argue that a Western ethnocentric perspective on refugee wellbeing poses the risk of actually doing harm, if disregarding or in fact inadvertently working against coping mechanisms that might be inherent to an individual's culture and frame of mind. In an attempt to overcome the medicalizing and ethnocentric psychiatric perspective, some qualitative studies have emphasized a coping and resilience approach (Carlson et al. 2012, Cunniff 2008, Eide & Hjern 2013, Mekonnen 2000). The special coping mechanisms of refugee children have also received some attention (Almqvist & Hwang 1999, Ajduković 1998).

Support for refugees and asylum seekers has received less interest in the literature. Some examples of case studies include Barnes & Aquilar (2007) on social support for Cuban refugees; Chung et al. (2000) on social support for Vietnamese refugees; Gordon

et al. (2010) on psycho-educational workshops for Iraqi refugees; and Pecora & Fraser (1985) on the social support networks of refugees.

Salem-Pickatz (2007) finds in her research on a project training peer counsellors in two refugee camps that peer support is successful in providing significant personal support. Another study by Stewart and her colleagues (2012) on a pilot project for Sudanese and Somali refugees in Canada reports decreased loneliness and improved coping skills as benefits of the project. The literature on refugee support provided here is by no means exhaustive, but rather merely exemplary and sufficient for present purposes, since none of the research corresponds directly to the type of peer support described in this thesis.

For the purposes of this research, another central concept of interest is that of peer support. I will return to the literature concerning peer support in the next section, as I attempt to construct a loose framework for understanding the workings of psychosocial peer support for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.

4 Theoretical Framework

The life situation of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers is one perhaps best described as a multi-layering, or indeed multiplication, of different aspects of the refugee experience. They are not only children, but also refugee children. But they are also not only refugee children, but ones separated from family. Adding another layer, they are also not only unaccompanied refugee children, but more specifically asylum seekers, which entails a liminal status and a deep uncertainty about the future.

In approaching a peer support project for this special group, it seemed necessary to take this multi-layered nature of their life situation into consideration. I will first draw from a model built for understanding the multifaceted individual situations of refugees and immigrants, to build an initial outline as to what kinds of special experiences and circumstances the support received might affect. Second, I will concentrate on the

concept of peer support and the ways in which it is thought to function. Third, I will move onto a more general level and focus on refugee representations.

4.1 Factors Affecting Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers

Whenever referring to a given group of human beings, one runs the risk of homogenizing individual life experience and failing to sufficiently understand and appreciate the variety of experience and life histories. Brough and his colleagues (2003) argue that one must understand the intertwined aspects of biography, society, and personal experiences of an individual, and be aware of the construct one is making when talking about a category such as *refugee youth*. Also, individuals should be understood in terms of the whole of their lives, much as they view themselves, with a complex interweaving of past, present and future, phenomena such as traumatic experiences being only part of the complex whole of experience.

However, there are clearly some circumstances and experiences that the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers encountered in this research share, which cannot be excluded in the exploration into their lives. In mapping out a checklist of such phenomena, I am relying on the extensive framework crafted by Binnie Kristal-Andersson (2001).

Here, a critical word is in order. In writing about refugees, or indeed in the images that we encounter through news and appeals for supporting humanitarian aid, many have noted a construction of "the exile experience" (Malkki 2007b), which serves to homogenize, depoliticize, and dehistorize the phenomena that surround exile, the people actually involved, and the processes that take place before, during and after. I shall return to these themes towards the end of this thesis.

In my view, Kristal-Andersson attempts to get around this homogenization by building a comprehensive framework of aspects and experiences that tries to capture as relevant a picture of a life situation of an individual as possible. This is an individual psychological viewpoint. One could well argue, that Western psychology and psychiatry are indeed accomplices in the depoliticizing of refugees' experiences. In

well-meaning processes of systematizing mental illness, the fact that a person has experienced traumatic events, has had to flee his/her home, and/or has suffered losses because of the very real circumstances of war, poverty and inequality, becomes reduced to a condition of individual pathology. Thus, torture becomes trauma, prejudice and racism become paranoia, and loss of loved ones becomes depression.

For present purposes, however, I am using Kristal-Andersson's framework simply as a checklist aiding me in describing what the situation into which Safety Net enters, is like. Kristal-Andersson claims that regardless of the country of origin or the reasons behind immigration or seeking refuge, refugees and immigrants share a process of inner questioning – either conscious or unconscious – related to the many levels of change that he/she is encountering. This questioning process may at best lead to psychological integration. It may, however, also be painful and lead to identity conflicts. (2001, 22.) Kristal-Andersson forms a complex theoretical framework for understanding the lives of refugees and immigrants, and suggests its application for therapeutic purposes. I will briefly summarize the framework, and then select the aspects relevant for this research. This will provide a tool for reflecting on the overall context of the asylum seekers' existence, and the specific areas of experience that peer support targets, as illuminated by the data.

Kristal-Andersson's framework addresses the individual situations of refugees through different dimensions. First, there is the broader context, which the author calls *the refugee/immigrant situation*. By this term she means a wide spectrum of elements of outer change, ranging from climate to culture, from socio-economic status to race, from employment to religion etc. Accompanying and affected by these outer changes may be significant inner ones. (Ibid., 25.)

In addition to the refugee/immigrant situation, the framework introduces six *aspects*, which are in turn broken up into as many as seventeen components or variations. The six aspects are: 1) states of being, 2) the adaptation cycle, 3) childhood experiences, 4) relevant background conditions, 5) reasons for asylum seeking or immigration, and 6) transition-related conditions. The refugee/immigrant situation together with the six aspects forms the dimensions of the framework. The framework as a whole provides a

dynamic mapping of an individual's life experience, with the different dimensions affecting each other. (Ibid., 23–4.)

Of the six aspects, I find the states of being, relevant background conditions, and transition-related conditions the most relevant for this research. I will use them as an aid in examining different aspects that the peer support provided by project Safety Net might affect.

In Kristal-Andersson's words,

> […] the expression [states of being] as a whole attempts to approach a definition of the feelings, thoughts or conditions that seem to surround the person's life or existence in the new country (ibid., 86).

These feelings and experiences, which are to some extent universal in the sense that they are probably experienced by everyone at some point in life, become states of being when they receive some permanence or become a more predominant experience. Kristal-Andersson lists sixteen states of being that may affect a refugee's life. The states of being are: *stranger, loneliness, missing, guilt, shame, separation and loss, sorrow, language degradation, value degradation, inferiority, non-identity, rootlessness, bitterness, suspicion, prejudice, and scapegoat.* (Ibid., 86–165.)

As relevant background conditions, Kristal-Andersson includes age, both at present and on arrival, sex and gender roles, homeland, environment, landscape, climate, culture, religious and political background, skin color, ethnicity and ethnic background, society, language, education, employment, and socioeconomic background (ibid., 181–9). The scope of this list illustrates the complexity of phenomena affecting an individual refugee's life situation and experience. Here, however, I want to highlight the importance of age, and especially the developmental stage of adolescence.

Adolescent development is well beyond the scope of this research, but a brief note on the special circumstances of adolescence is in order. I will not comprehensively review theories of developmental psychology, but rather offer a reminder of the fact that in addition to other aspects, such as life experiences or the asylum seeking status, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are also a special group in terms of age.

One of the most pertinent themes of adolescence is that of identity formation, which is said, psychologically, to be the most important developmental task of this stage of life (Klimstra et al. 2010, Crocetti et al. 2008, Kroger 2009). The long shift from childhood to adulthood poses many challenges, including having to tolerate change within oneself. The whole of childhood is to be molded into something new, and in the process one must become independent from parents and other authority figures, and integrate a new sense of a sexual body into one's sense of self. (Impiö 2004.)

It is clear to see how the processes of building independence and coming to terms with sexuality can be extremely difficult in the situation that unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are in. There are no parents present with whom the ambivalent process of becoming independent could be lived through. The perplexity that a developing sexuality causes can be heightened by the move to a culture that is potentially very different in values and customs regarding sexuality than the one that the children have grown up in.

Another developmental aspect of adolescence is the imagining of a future for the self. An adolescent is in the midst of finding out what he/she thinks a meaningful life consists of, and what his/her aspirations in terms of education, work, or family might be. This process, too, is suspended in a situation where the whole future is unknown. The complication of these developmental processes can potentially have an impact on future adult life. (Impiö 2004.)

The third aspect of Kristal-Andersson's framework chosen for its relevance here is that of transition-related conditions. This aspect is again broken down into multiple components. These include previous experiences in the country of origin, possible traumatic experiences, the immigration process including asylum seeking, lowered self-esteem, ambivalence about the decision to flee/emigrate, dreams of return, and loss of society. (2001, pp. 214–33.)

The asylum seeking process is a defining context of the children that this research concerns. This can be described as an existence in between worlds. The wait for the decision is a major source of stress and anxiety. Other circumstances such as

accommodation in the group homes in relative isolation in this case are also relevant aspects to consider. (See Lähteenmäki 2013.)

4.2 Understanding Peer Support

Interestingly, like the literature on refugee wellbeing, the research and theoretical thinking about peer support has also been conducted mainly in the context of mental illness and recovery (see Coatsworth-Puspoky et al. 2006, Davidson et al. 1999, Landers & Zhou 2011), and in HIV treatment and prevention programs (see Campbell & Mzaidume 2001, Casparian 2004). However, this research provides grounds for conceptualizing peer support and hypothesizing about the way it functions in other realms as well, namely in the context of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.

Mead, Hilton, and Curtis (2001, 135) define peer support as "a system of giving and receiving help […] [which is] about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain." They stress the importance of trust in the relationships involved, and with increasing trust, the potential of peer support in providing opportunities to change through challenging existing modes of behavior and self-concepts. Peer support can be influential in building community and reducing isolation, through means such as mutual social activities.

The definition above provides the basis for my use of the concept of peer support. However, a few adjustments should be made for this case. First, the peer tutors are peers for the children through shared experience. I wish to extend shared experience to include more than just emotional and psychological pain, but rather a range of different experiences including positive ones, such as the relief of escaping a threatening situation, or other different experiences related to life in a new environment.

While the peer tutors are peers for the children in this way, they are also *not* their peers in two important senses. First, they are adults, which makes for an unequal power relation between them and the children. Second, they are no longer asylum seekers, which also has implications to the relationship that they share with the children.

Davidson and his colleagues (1999), also concentrating on mental health, divide peer support programs into three types: mutual support, consumer-run services, and the employment of consumers as providers in clinical settings. Project Safety Net does not fit any of these categories directly, but Davidson and his colleagues offer a valuable analysis on the ways that mutual support works in. They suggest that mutual support works in four main ways: through sharing of experiences that increases self-understanding and decreases social isolation; through social interaction that enables people to adopt socially valuable roles; as a structured process offering access to information and skills; and potentially offering new worldviews helpful in making sense of life experience.

Coatsworth-Puspoky, Forchuc, and Ward-Griffin (2006) have investigated the factors affecting the relationships in mental health peer support. They find that these include trust or a special bond, experiential knowledge and a sense of camaraderie. Behnia (2003) describes what he calls an individual's convoy of social supports. In any individual's life, a network of family, friends, neighbors, and other relations provide emotional, informational, financial and other kinds of social support that helps to overcome challenges. This convoy shifts with life circumstances. Exile dramatically cuts off all or most of a person's convoy of social supports. Peer support can become a significant part of his/her convoy in a new life situation.

4.3 Refugee Representations

During fieldwork the theme of refugee representations emerged as important. Unveiling and challenging existing representations especially of so-called subaltern groups is a central concern of postcolonial studies, which draws upon a literary viewpoint, and the roots of which are commonly traced to Edward Saïd's 1978 classic *Orientalism* (see Kapoor 2008). In the words of Rodrigues and Game (1998, 2714), these are "the concerns of an anthropology that seeks to go beyond the essentialisms of both colonial anthropology and liberal rights discourse". It is important to think about what is constructed when talking about a group such as refugees or unaccompanied minor

asylum seekers.

Spivak (1988) draws attention to the fact that there are two distinct meanings of the term representation. The first is to act as representative, to speak on behalf of someone. The other is "re-presenting", presenting a specific kind of picture of someone. Here, I am interested in the latter meaning, as I turn my attention to the representations of refugees and asylum seekers. A postcolonial stance attempts to turn attention to the representational practices that the dominant impose on the subaltern (Kapoor 2008, xiv).

For my discussion of refugee representations as illustrated by this case study, I will rely mainly on the work of Liisa Malkki (2007b, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). She challenges the category of *the refugee* both in refugee administration and scholarship and traces its emergence both historically and through examining the numerous discursive domains relevant to the category, including UN agencies and different scholarly fields (Malkki 1995b).

Malkki (1995b) argues that the concept of refugees is in fact useful mainly as a broad administrative category rather than being a natural analytical object of knowledge. This is because forced migration occurs for such a variety of political and historical reasons, to people with a myriad of different life histories, psychological states and socioeconomic situations.

The emergence of refugees as a category of research is often traced to the refugee crises of the world wars in Europe. World War I produced an unprecedented amount of refugees in Europe, and resulted in the need both for the restriction of immigration and for the discernment of migrants that needed protection. (Zolberg et al. 1989.) Yet perhaps one of the most important historical moments in the development of refugee studies has been placed in the wake of the Second World War in Europe. During this period, the management of refugees became an international question, and *the refugee* became solidified as a social and legal category. This was facilitated by various processes, many of which were embedded in the formation of the refugee camp. (Malkki 1995b.)

During World War II, refugees were seen first and foremost as a military problem. After the war, by the time the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was

established in 1951, the perspective shifted toward a more humanitarian or social one. This time period also saw the development of international refugee law and related conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. (Malkki 1995b.)

Although it is difficult to historically map the academic field of refugee studies, one feature of its development is that it has always been connected to refugee policy (Black 2001). It has been even further suggested that the "international refugee regime", consisting of UN organizations and conventions, national agencies, aid agencies and NGOs, has been central in the development of refugee studies as an academic field (Zolberg et al. 1989). Furthermore, international refugee law, developed from the latter part of the 20th century onward, has played a significant part in building the contemporary image of the refugee. This legal apparatus is based on an assumption of sovereign nation states as the unquestioned order of the world. (Malkki 1995b.)

Decolonization, shifting national boundaries and the establishment of new ones, turned the refugee problem from a European to a Third World one, and finally, to a global one. The vast majority of world refugees remain in the developing world, and while it can be argued that mass displacement of people is and has been affected by processes such as colonialism and inequality of trade, Western countries have been quick to close boundaries and defend themselves from immigration, especially from the 1980's onward. (Malkki 1995b.)

Refugee studies itself as a field of knowledge can be seen as part of this process. For example Chimni (1998) discusses the geopolitics of knowledge production and describes how the study of refugees has assisted in formulating the "myth of difference", according to which refugee flows in the third world are caused by significantly different reasons than those in Europe.

From the point of view of refugee representations, then, Malkki (1995b) notes how refugees often become the problem. Rather than ordinary people, they are a group that requires fixing and solving. In the process, the focus shifts away from the oppression, violence and political inequality that actually create refugees.

This problematization is one part of the construct, another is the generalization of refugees. There is a tendency to universalize *the refugee* in both literal and photographic representation, as an image of powerlessness and horror. Malkki (1995a, 11) especially draws attention to the images of refugee women and children, suggesting that "children have come to embody, more easily than adults, the universalism of a bare humanity". Refugees come to symbolize a kind of stripped, naked, basic humanity, a human being losing all specificity when crossing national borders. As a consequence of the universalization and problematization of refugees, they become routinely silenced, and their own narratives easily discredited (Malkki 1996).

This body of work informs my research in two ways. First, through allowing me to focus on my own preconceptions and practices of representation, it helps in deepening the level of reflexivity in this study. Second, it provides a basis on which to build when analyzing how the children are constructed in the Finnish asylum practices and within project Safety Net.

5 Methods, Data, and Ethical Considerations

5.1 Methodological Approaches

The nature of the object of research directed me to use multiple methods of data collection. Different methods can produce complementary data, and bring forth different aspects of reality and experience, especially when conducting research with children (Darbyshire et al. 2005, Lambert et al. 2013). The core of the data was acquired through participant observation, which was accompanied by group discussions and semi-structured interviews, in addition to some archival data.

The use of various methodological approaches provided an opportunity for cross-validation of observations. Data sets collected with different methods also informed each other, so that participant observation inspired the content of the semi-structured

interviews. Similarly, what was learned in interviews affected the focus of observation, whereas previously made observations proved convenient starting points for conversation in group discussions.

This research is essentially an ethnographic study. Ethnography entails participant observation, and an attempt at arriving at a valid interpretation of contextualized experience through observation. However, the ethnographer is not only an observer, but also a subjective participant. Ethnography can be said to utilize personal intuition and even affect, and self-reflection is a central element of it. It also entails a certain unpredictability and a need for improvisation on the part of the ethnographer. (Malkki 2007a, see also Geertz 1973.)

I will now describe the different methodological approaches used in more detail, and provide reasons for their respective utilization.

5.1.1 Participant Observation

According to DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, 2), participant observation is "a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take part in the common or uncommon activities of the people being studied". It is both a method for data collection and an analytical tool.

Participant observation was chosen as the main approach for several reasons. First, the object of this research is the relationship between the Safety Net peer tutors and the asylum seeker children and the support that the latter receive. This relationship, as a process, is best studied as it occurs naturally, through observation in addition to verbal accounts (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011).

Second, the children that are informants of this research were in the process of seeking asylum. This meant that they had been, and continued to be, subjected to many forms of questioning and interrogation. In addition to the stressful circumstances of their liminal status, they also faced being in a foreign country without family, and many had

experienced traumatic events in their recent history. It was of utmost importance that this research not become an additional emotional burden to the children.

Moreover, due to experiences in the past, many asylum seeking children can be wary of adults asking questions and prone to reticence (Kohli 2006). Therefore, participant observation provided a preferable alternative to direct interviews. I was able to directly observe – and participate in – the project in action, and witness the relationships between the children and peer support tutors as they unfolded.

Indeed, for studying adolescents and children in general, observation is arguably often a more fruitful tool than direct interviews. Being asked questions can be intimidating or bothersome for anyone, but it has been noted that interviewing young people can be especially difficult, because compared to adults, young informants may be shy or reluctant. Limited talking can in fact also be part of ordinary adolescence and a tool for building independence. (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan 2014, 438, Kohli 2006.)

For the same reasons, a questionnaire method was not chosen. This was also influenced by the fact that the children spoke a multitude of different languages, were of different ages, and had widely varying backgrounds in terms of education.

5.1.2 Group Discussions

In order to provide an opportunity for the children to explicitly express their feelings about Safety Net, group discussions were used. The discussion groups were mostly assembled according to language, with a peer tutor acting as interpreter. Group discussions have been found to be an effective way of exploring children's thoughts, attitudes and feelings. Group discussions can encourage open conversation and create a more relaxed and informal situation compared to interviewing informants individually. (Scott 2000, O'Kane 2000.) Group discussions are also an efficient way of gathering data in a short amount of time, and can encourage discussion about sensitive topics (Carey 2012).

5.1.3 Peer Tutor Interviews

Open-ended interviews were conducted with some of Safety Net peer tutors. The tutors interviewed were ones that had either been involved with the project from the very beginning, or had broad knowledge and insight about it due to their special role as employees or trainees, or both. In the interviews, I was able to deepen my understanding of specific observations I had made, inquire about the role that peer tutors feel they have in the children's lives, and how they themselves have experienced project Safety Net.

5.2 Data

Data collection started in October 2013 and ended in January 2014. Safety Net peer tutors visited the group homes in Siuntio and Espoo on Tuesdays and Thursdays respectively. I accompanied the peer tutors on these visits and participated in the activities planned. A different group of peer tutors visited on different occasions. The trips back and forth with them also provided me with an opportunity for conversation and questions.

During the course of six separate Safety Net visits – three to each of the group homes – I encountered six peer tutors and three visiting students. One to four Safety Net representatives attended each visit. The visits lasted about five hours each, including transportation.

Both group homes hosted about 15–20 children at a time, but the population would change somewhat from week to week. At the time of meeting the children, some had been in Finland for more than a year, while others had arrived just days earlier. Participation in Safety Net activities was voluntary for the children, but I found that very few opted not to participate. Sometimes people would come and go, and a few would leave with group home employees to attend mosque or go to the gym or a doctor's appointment, but all in all, almost all of the children attended the activities.

In January 2014, towards the end of my data collection period, I was also able to attend a weekend camp provided by Safety Net for children from both group homes. I participated in camp activities during a nine hour day, and this gave me a chance to further deepen my perception of the project. It also provided a welcome opportunity for conversations with group home employees as well as the children and peer tutors throughout the day.

To provide further insight into the nature of the project, I also participated in a training/counseling day provided for Safety Net peer tutors. This was the sixth one organized since the beginning of the project. Training days offer support for peer tutors as well as theoretical education on specific themes relevant to unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, such as trauma or adolescent development.

In addition to participating and observing, I conducted seven short group discussions with the children, varying in length from just a few minutes to 30 minutes.[7] The groups were assembled mostly according to language: a group speaking a specific language would be asked to join me for a moment in a separate room, and a peer tutor would act as interpreter when needed. When language skills were sufficient, group discussions were held in English or Finnish without an interpreter.

Discussion groups ranged in size from two to eight participants, which according to Scott (2000) is in fact the recommended maximum when working with groups of children. Group discussions covered the whole population of the group homes with very few exceptions, although I have to question to what extent everyone's voice was equally heard. I will return to this question when discussing data limitations.

Individual open-ended interviews were conducted with four peer tutors. Other informants included the staff of the project, group home staff members and some other individuals involved. I also had some Safety Net records at my disposal, such as assessments previously conducted by the project itself. To provide some illustrative examples, I have also referred to the project director's blog, describing Safety Net from the beginning of the project to the end of my fieldwork.

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[7] One short individual interview also took place.

There are some limitations to the data, which I shall turn to next. My personal control over the circumstances of research was often limited, as is often the case in ethnographic research (Cerwonka 2007). More often than not, things turned out differently than originally planned. I was dependent on which peer tutors happened to be participating in a given day's visit, since that dictated which language groups I was able to access. A few of the group discussions are slightly lower in quality because of language difficulties. Toward the end of my data collection, the project temporarily ran out of funds, and could only send one peer tutor at a time. This hindered my research somewhat, but on the other hand also provided important insight. For example, the significance of the language aspect of the project was highlighted.

In group discussions, and in most conversations in general, I was mostly dependent on the peer tutors themselves to act as interpreters. The use of professional outside interpreters was not an option financially simply because of the amount of different languages present, and more importantly, it would have created a situation more resembling the interrogations that the children face in the context of the asylum process.

This raises some concerns. One can question the reliability of the data in a situation where the subject of group discussions concerned the very project the interpreter her/himself was intimately involved in. Would the children feel obliged to say nice things because one of the persons concerned was involved in the interview? Or would the interpreter be tempted in his/her choice of words to present the project in the best possible light?

The use of peer tutor interpreters – or indeed interpreters in general – was not optimal. However, I also had the chance to interview some of the children individually or in small groups without an interpreter present. These informants were children that spoke English as their mother tongue or very fluently, or had stayed in Finland long enough to master Finnish. The views they expressed privately about project Safety Net were very similar to those of the other groups. This gave me reassurance that the data from interpreted group discussions would also be reliable.

Moreover, many people concerned were of the opinion that peer tutors were the best option for interpreters. Many group home employees also speak the different languages

of the residents, but children and tutors alike expressed that the children are more at ease and free to speak their views with peer tutors than with group home staff, who are, although often an important positive presence in the children's lives and affectionate with them, to some extent seen as part of the immigration system.

In group discussions, individuals voiced their opinions to a varying degree. While I tried to encourage all participants to express their views, I have some concerns as to whether those with the most affectionate and longstanding relationships with peer tutors might have been more vocal than some others with perhaps a less intimate experience. Here, again, I relied on observation of actual interaction.

As research progressed, I became acutely aware of a shifting nature of things. A sense of constant change was present on many levels. The population of the group homes changed on an almost weekly basis as residents left upon receiving decisions on their status, or reaching adulthood, and new ones arrived. During the research period major structural changes took place as well, with the announcement of the closing down of one of the two group homes.

The project nature and funding of Safety Net meant that the project itself was constantly shifting, and significant changes in personnel also occurred during the time of research. Moreover, the operation of Safety Net had a dynamic and shifting nature by design. Any single visit would be different depending on not only the activities planned, but especially the specific personal relationships and dynamics involved. I found that observation was well suited for this constantly changing object of research.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

There are multiple reasons for special consideration of ethical issues concerning this research. First, as noted by Lindsay (2000), research involving human participants is always intrusive. In this case, the question of intrusion was highlighted by the fact that the people involved were minors. The degree of intrusiveness must be kept as low as possible when conducting research with under aged persons.

Many ethical issues, such as confidentiality and consent, are similarly concerns whether conducting research with adults or with children. However, these questions become accentuated when studying children and adolescents, especially due to unequal power relationships between the adult researcher and the child. (Thomas & O'Kane 1998.)

In addition to age, another special circumstance to consider was the children's vulnerable status as refugees and asylum seekers. They were in different stages of the asylum process, the outcome of which was unknown to them and crucial for the rest of their lives. In addition, they were vulnerable emotionally. Culture shock, separation from family, traumatic experiences, adaptation problems, and racism are just some of the special stressors that can affect unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (Bean et al. 2007, Derluyn 2007, Huemer et al. 2009).

An important asset of this research with regard to protecting the integrity and emotions of the children was the fact that the object of research was essentially project Safety Net, and not the life situations of the children. The intrusiveness of the research was kept at the lowest possible level. This was achieved through several aspects, mainly the circumstances of observation and the content of group discussions and interviews, as well as assuring the anonymity of the children.

Participant observation was carried out within the context of the operation of project Safety Net in the group homes. The initiative for this research was mine, and when I contacted project Safety Net in 2013, I received a positive response. This research was conducted with the consent and practical collaboration of project Safety Net, but was not commissioned by them, and is not an evaluation report. I was thus able to conduct this research as an independent scholar.

Participant observation meant that my presence did not affect the normal functions of group home life, but rather only added the presence of another person. Participant observation can be seen as a relatively unobtrusive research method in this sense.

I identified myself as a researcher studying the project to both children and group home staff. Group discussions were the only moments when normal activities were disrupted

by my presence, and I took care that they not take too much time from the activities planned for any given visit.

The content of the group discussions and interviews carried out with the children was limited to their experiences with project Safety Net, and the relationships they had with the peer tutors. I did not want to, nor did I need to, ask questions about the children's past experiences, the stage of their asylum process or their reasons for fleeing. Rather, the focus of my interest was on how they experience the peer support that project Safety Net aspires to provide. I have also strived to protect the anonymity of the children. I will not be referring to names or ages of specific individuals in this thesis.

6 The Why, Who, and How of Peer Support

Salient themes began to emerge early on during the process of fieldwork, as is typical for an ethnographic approach. Through a systematic thematic analysis of interview data and field notes, I then constructed an illustration of the workings of project Safety Net, which is organized into the "Why", the "Who" and the "How" of peer support.

Starting with the "why" of peer support, I will first describe the context into which peer support enters, and which it is hoped to affect, namely the life situation of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Using Binnie Kristal-Andersson's (2001) framework, I will concentrate on themes which came up in the data consistently.

Next, I will focus on the "who" of peer support, classifying different roles of peer tutors drawn out from the data, and relating them to the context described in the first part. The third part of this chapter describes the "how" of peer support, specifically what the key characteristics of project Safety Net are, and what features contribute to its functioning. Finally, I will address some obstacles and hindrances to the working of peer support in this context.

Throughout this chapter, excerpts from interviews and group discussions will be provided as examples of typical or particularly illustrative expressions of the phenomena I am describing.

6.1 The Why of Peer Support: Life as an Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seeker

6.1.1 Transition-Related Conditions

One of the aspects described in Kristal-Andersson's framework is called transition-related conditions. Under this aspect she lists several possible components of being a refugee, including experiences in the country of origin and lowered self-esteem. (2001, 214.) I will, however, use the term in a narrower sense, and limit it to some key aspects of the transitional nature of being an asylum seeker.

6.1.1.1 Liminality

Written on a whiteboard in one of the group homes there was an aphorism: "Your past is over. Your future starts now." Yet, an asylum seeker is in a liminal state between an often traumatic past and an unknown future. There is, on one hand, often a sense of relief, of being safe from whatever was threatening safety before, and on the other hand an uncertainty about what the future will bring. These sentiments were expressed in artwork that the Siuntio children made for an exhibition, which I shall return to in more detail. Many expressed a deep gratitude for the things they had received in Finland and for the care they had received from group home staff.

Hopes or plans for the future can be hard to imagine, they have been put on hold. Life has become divided into before, now, and after. When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, one young girl replied:

> Now! Now I don't think about it. Before, I wanted to be an engineer.
> UMAS[8]

Waiting for the asylum decision can be extremely taxing. Many peer tutors and staff members described waiting as the most defining aspect of the children's lives. Kristal-Andersson (ibid., 219–20), too, claims that for asylum seekers the wait is a constant source of stress that can have significant after-effects as well.

The children live through the wait together, and also have to witness others receiving or being denied asylum. In both cases, they have to part with the people that have been an intimate part of their daily life. In addition, the fact that others receive decisions may bring up jealousy or fear for one's own future. One can only assume that these experiences can result in a range of emotions, from joy and relief to anxiety, fear and sorrow. Both resentment and jealousy and solidarity and loyalty can be responses to these processes (ibid., 219–20).

Indeed, there was a sense of everything being in constant flux in the group homes. This was true on an immediate, everyday level; there really was a lot of coming and going with staff changing shifts, and children going about their ordinary activities. But also in a longer-term perspective, change was ever present. New asylum seekers would arrive, and old ones receive their decisions and move on. A group home is a transit place, a stop on the way somewhere else, and the newly acquired closest daily relationships are constantly changing, too.

6.1.1.2 Seclusion

In addition to this temporariness, there is a strong sense of seclusion. When I joined Safety Net peer tutors for the very first time on a visit to the Espoo group home, I was struck by its remote location. Walking from the bus stop, after traveling from Helsinki first by train and then by bus, I felt almost incredulous, with an urge to ask my guides whether we were actually going the right way. The distance was not incredibly long per

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[8]After excerpts, UMAS refers to unaccompanied minor asylum seeker, and PT refers to peer tutor. I do not wish to identify each speaker or interview more specifically so as to protect the anonymity of the people involved.

se, but to reach the group home, one must walk a stretch of forest road with no buildings and very little lighting[9], after first passing a dead end sign.

This feeling only intensified on my next visit, when I joined Safety Net on their weekly visit to Harjulinna, the group home in Siuntio. Harjulinna, which at the time of writing has been closed, was located in the countryside. After a train ride of slightly less than an hour, the staff from Harjulinna would pick us up by car to make the rest of the way. To go anywhere from here, the children were completely dependent on transportation by staff members.

On one occasion an asylum seeker child in Espoo commented on this isolation. After one of those long walks through the woods we were wondering why the group homes would be placed the way they are.

> Because we are refugees, everyone hates us. UMAS

On several other occasions, peer tutors would reflect on the locations of the group homes. There was also speculation as to how much anxiety or even aggression the isolation might induce.

The remoteness of the group homes entails that there is not much variety or opportunities for fun or recreational activities in the children's lives. The locations also do not create ideal conditions for building social relations outside of the group homes, with the exception of school. Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers go to school after first taking only Finnish classes for a while.[10]

Group home staff did provide opportunities for some recreational activities like swimming or going to the gym, and would take the children to mosque. Many staff members were active in arranging activities and different experiences for the children.

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[9] Admittedly, my field work took place at the darkest possible time of year in Finland. Consequently, it was always dark at the time of my visits. This fact probably intensified the feeling of isolation somewhat.
[10] This was not always the case. Previously, since asylum seekers are not residents of any municipality, no authority had the obligation of providing schooling for them. Recently, this issue has been settled and all the children are in school. This, of course, is good for their future integration into Finland, and also a counterbalance for the isolation of group home life. However, children enter the school system from very different starting points. Some have been to good schools, while some have never sat in a classroom. Socially, one can assume that their status is not necessarily easy. Entry into the Finnish school system would, however, be another topic of research altogether.

The children had access to computers, and in Harjulinna there was a gym at their disposal. Still, the location in itself did not lend itself very well to spontaneous activities outside the walls of the group homes.

> This is like a prison. There is nothing to do here. UMAS

The asylum seekers were, in fact, not detained in any way, but there was indeed a flavor of imprisonment in the group homes. Illustrative of this atmosphere, and contributing to it, in one of the group homes each exit had a sign forbidding the opening of the door without permission from the staff, and keeping doors locked at all times, for the safety of the inhabitants. This also raised questions about the nature of the danger threatening the said safety.

The characteristics of the transition period, and the conditions of the daily life of asylum seekers described above, relate to the post-flight stressors referred to previously (see chapter 3.2). Silove and his colleagues (1997), for example, have studied the relationship between past trauma and continued stress during the asylum seeking process, and find that loneliness and boredom are associated statistically with depression and anxiety.

6.1.2 Age

Of the relevant background conditions listed by Kristal-Andersson, age is one of the most important ones in the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. The age range of the children placed in the group homes is 11–17 years, which are highly important and formative years in a child's development. Significant developmental tasks of adolescence, such as achieving emotional independence from one's parents or other important adults, have been violently interrupted or are forced to be put on hold. Yet the prerequisites for healthy development are the same as for any adolescent. (Taskinen 2011.)

The children themselves did not bring up their age or the fact that they were children or adolescents, perhaps because this was self-evident. Childhood came up more in relation

to missing family. The age factor was more frequently present in peer tutors' reflections.

> I came as an adult, and they are children. They are underage, they are minors. So if you can imagine, if I came as an adult […] and I go through some things like homesick, miss my family, but still an adult, I go through all these emotions. How much more a minor? PT

> I don't know if you know how these children got here. I know exactly how they got here. I can give you an example. This one boy was in the back of a truck for 48 hours like this [shows position with knees to face] wet and with one liter of water, this boy, 14 years old. PT

> When a child comes alone, and they are under aged, it is such a difficult stage of life. PT

6.1.3 Language

Children who had recently arrived in Finland could sometimes be in a situation of not being able to communicate at all. The staff of group homes were a multicultural group, so often a child would at least at times find someone to understand him/her, and interpreters were always provided for any official business. Yet, the stress of not being able to speak one's mother tongue was something tangible, and an issue that was often discussed with peer tutors on our train rides.

> […] language is very fundamental. These guys are speechless, they cannot communicate. Imagine yourself, put yourself in their shoes. And then once a week you get the opportunity to speak some words in your own language, you feel good. PT

In fact, every peer tutor that I encountered had stories to tell about what it was like when they didn't possess the language skills that they did at present. This was another point at which they shared a very fundamental experience with the children. I also witnessed

this, and experienced this for myself on at least one occasion, when a group discussion all but failed because of language issues. There was a mutual sense of frustration and embarrassment of not being understood and not understanding the other.

6.2 The Who of Peer Support: Peer Tutor Roles

I will now specify the different types of roles of peer tutors discovered from the data. This classification was reached through observing different situations and analyzing the descriptions given by both the children and the peer tutors themselves. The roles are, of course, not separate or exclusive, in the sense that a peer tutor would be consciously playing one specific role at any given time. Rather, they are offered as an analytical tool for determining the ways in which peer support touches on the aspects of underage asylum seeker life described above. I argue that through these different roles, peer support can fill some gaps in the children's convoy of social support (see chapter 4.2, Behnia 2003).

6.2.1 Peer Tutor as Friend/Confidant

The role of the peer tutor as friend that I am describing here suggests the kind of role that a friend might have in more ordinary circumstances, namely being someone to have fun with, visit different places with, share important and confidential thoughts and emotions with, and simply hang around with. Due to a number of factors, including language barriers in the new country, and being new arrivals in virtually all the social situations they encounter, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers have these things farther from their reach compared to other teenagers or children (Behnia 2003).

As mentioned before, group home life was characterized by a sense of isolation and monotony. Many children saw the weekly break from ordinary group home life that Safety Net provided as very important. They expressed that they looked forward to the

visits every week, and wished that they were more frequent. The change that the visits provided in the children's lives was mentioned in all group interviews.

> We are waiting for it, for every Tuesday, we are having some change, and we enjoy the time they are here. UMAS

> I would like more that they come every day. UMAS

> If they didn't come, we wouldn't have much fun. Yeah, so it's good for them to come each and every week. UMAS

Often the change meant something very simple, like enjoying snacks and chatting together. On the way to each visit, peer tutors would stop at a store to pick up fruits, sweets, chips and soft drinks to bring to the children. Children would gather at the dining area to eat and chat before the activities planned for the evening would begin.

However, there seemed to be another more significant change that Safety Net could offer the children, which was mentioned frequently. This had to do with breaking the isolation described above and leaving the group homes on different visits, to the movies, to the city center, or to concerts.

Perhaps the most important breaks that Safety Net could offer the children were camps, which were organized in collaboration with different organizations, such as the Scouts. Spending a few nights away from the confines of the group homes was seen as something special to look forward to. Camp weekends and weeks provided the children with unique experiences, and significantly, also an opportunity to bond with the children from the other group home. For the Harjulinna children, for example, the Espoo children represented not only actual peers, clearly even more so than the peer tutors, but also perhaps the only people that they would call friends outside of the group home.

I attended one of these camps for a day in January 2014. The camp was held at a recreational center owned by a Finnish religious community, which provided the facilities free of charge. Some experiences were memorable for both the children and for myself, such as preparing salmon over an open fire in -15 ˚C, while learning Finnish

campfire songs and singing other ones in Arabic and other languages. I was told later, that "campfire fish on black bread" was commented on as the best experience of the whole trip, even though before, several of the children had communicated that they do not eat fish. Camp life created the impression of an animated and high-spirited mixture of exotic Finnish experiences such as ice swimming from the sauna, and memories and celebration of things from home, like during an evening dance to some favorite tunes from back home.

Friendship, however, means more than going to places, it signifies a deep connection and the experience of sharing. A sense of connection came up consistently throughout the data. The children expressed that they felt a different kind of bond and trust with Safety Net peer tutors than they did with group home staff.

> We have […] with [Safety Net peer tutors] some kind of connection which […] we don't have it with "ohjaajat"[11] here. So when we want to talk about anything special then we are waiting for [Safety Net] to talk about what problems we have. UMAS

> We are talking with them about everything. UMAS

> Like one person told me […] the respect and love you give to me I never received in my life. PT

Sometimes sharing meant keeping secrets. Children and peer tutors both described the role of tutors as that of a confidant, in a situation in which the children would not otherwise have had one. Secrets that a teenager might normally share with a friend or a family member were shared with peer tutors. A common language often provided the opportunity and incentive for this kind of sharing. The language aspect was also seen as the basis for building a close relationship with the children.

> We are enjoying the time we are talking our own language with peer support […] keeping this way secrets. UMAS

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[11] The Finnish word "ohjaaja" was commonly used for group home staff.

> When somebody speaks your language […] there is that emotion. It's the magic of language. PT

> The most important thing is when we talk in our own mother tongue. When we talk deeply about things. It is so important. PT

Of course, sometimes even Safety Net peer tutors were not familiar with a child's language. This anecdote from the project director's blog illustrates the creative ways of dealing with these kinds of situations:

> There is a girl who does not really speak any of the languages. On a piece of paper, she writes down the name of her own language, which we have never heard of. […] We find a person in Seinäjoki [another city in Finland], who comes from the same country, and have the girl phone this person. […] She sits and talks with passion on the phone in her own language. We agree to give her the phone number so she can call anytime, and maybe even visit. (Muma 2012.)

The peer tutor as friend/confidant could provide emotional support in hard times. The case of a negative decision to an asylum application was a frequent example given.

> We cannot help the children, for example when there is a negative decision for them, what can we do with the officials for them? But we can support mentally. PT

Also, what made the peer tutors peers to the children was their firsthand experience of being a refugee, or being an unaccompanied minor asylum seeker. This shared experience was often seen as important to the forming of deep and trusting relationships with the children.

> As someone who has a refugee background myself, and I have lived how they are living now before […] I go through all those emotions. PT

6.2.2 Peer Tutor as Family

The sense of connection between peer tutors and the children was often referred to with even deeper expressions than those of friendship; very frequently it was described in the language of family relations. It was common in the group discussions for the children to express that a peer tutor was like his/her mother, but also the peer tutors would refer to the children as their little brothers, sisters or daughters.

> One of the peer support ladies who is coming here, she is meaning for me like my mom, because I haven't a mom in here. UMAS

> I give myself to them as a big brother and I tell them […] I see you as my little brother or little sister. PT

> I feel toward them like my own children. I think about if it was my own children there alone in a reception center. Trust was born when I always held them and was with them in their joys and sorrows. PT

The deep mother-daughter like connections that many described could be observed in the encounters between peer tutors and the children. The tutors were always greeted with smiles and hugs. It was common to see a woman peer tutor and a girl talking and sharing, holding hands. Boys would share a camaraderie with male peer tutors from an age group close to theirs, marked by friendly banter and joking.

An example of a particularly touching encounter was one between a group of girls and a specific peer tutor that had not been present for visits in some time. When we arrived at the group home and opened the door, and the girls saw who was coming, their faces lit up, and they shouted to the others, "*PT* is here!" The entrance hall became filled with girly screaming, laughter, embraces, and an enthusiastic exhibition of new clothes and photographs of recent significant life events.

While some of the connections ran as deep as familial ones, it is important to note that not every peer tutor was as close to every child. The bonds were indeed personal, and could not affect everyone in the same way. While I did observe peer tutors making an

effort to communicate with everyone equally, some connections were inevitably more intimate than others. The children expressed in group discussions the special bonds they had with specific peer tutors.

Also, at any given time, there would be children who had only just arrived, and were indeed only learning of such a thing as Safety Net, while others had had months or even more than a year to bond with peer tutors. A shared language also contributed significantly to the special connections that formed between certain children and peer tutors.

> I can talk, yes. I can talk with [name of peer tutor], not with all. UMAS

> I have only been here a month, so I don't know. UMAS

With family, also the image of home was evoked. Feeling like home came up most often in connection with language, food and music. Language was an important thing that would take both children and tutors back home. Cooking traditional foods from home together was also frequently mentioned by the children and peer tutors alike.

> They are cooking, because we are different nationalities here […] we are cooking different kinds of food […] our own food […] we are feeling like we are back home. UMAS

> They miss the food from home, the spices, the flavors […] that is why I cook for them as often as possible. When I cook for them, they are so happy. PT

> When we talk in our own language, or sometimes we sing with them, it comes to mind, ah, when I was small I heard this song. Or when we talk about food. A child likes her own mother's food. PT

The strong attachments inevitably led to sadness at times of separation, although positive asylum decisions were always a source of joy for everyone involved.

> It is sad when a child leaves, but it is so good when a child has his own, good life, they start their life on their own […] they have opportunities of

> moving forward […] or they get jobs sometimes […] we want their lives
>
> to go on. PT

6.2.3 Peer Tutor as Mentor/Role Model

Moving from one country and culture to another, one can encounter many puzzling phenomena. Peer tutors offered the children knowledge and guidance on the practicalities of Finnish life, as well as sometimes helping them with their language studies. Moreover, conversations with peer tutors offered a chance to mirror cultural differences between Finland and the children's countries of origin.

A peer tutor could be seen as an older and more experienced guide to navigating in Finland, while still sharing the same background and refugee experience with the children. As an example, I witnessed an animated conversation between one of the children and a peer tutor who was originally from the same area, about the differences in child rearing in Finland and in their area of origin. There was a lot of amusement about the ways that teenagers communicate with their elders in both countries, which provided a light-hearted way of reflecting on cultural differences.

According to Davidson (1999), one of the ways in which peer support works is through social interaction that enables people to adopt socially valuable roles. As mentors, peer tutors could promote self-esteem and provide the children with positive experiences of themselves in social situations. This was seen as important especially because the children have to struggle with many things on a daily basis being in the process of learning a new language and culture.

> When we do something together, we affect their self-confidence. When we
>
> give a child something: you can do this, for example craft or food, they
>
> think that adults have trust in them […] that they trust them to do these
>
> things. It means a lot. PT

The children were also given opportunities to express themselves and demonstrate their special talents, whether they were in art, football or dance. On one visit, I was able to join the children and peer tutors, as they watched video footage of a party held by Safety net at an earlier time. The party involved a fashion show with people wearing their native attire, traditional dance shows and drama. It seemed obvious that people had enjoyed themselves, and that the children had taken pride in taking the stage and performing.

Peer tutors would also give the children advice, often stressing the importance of learning the Finnish language and getting an education.

> If you wanna have a better life, wanna drive to work in the daytime like a normal human being does, feel good: go to school, learn the language. So this is what I tell them. PT

Peer tutors also provided positive role models for the children, often being examples of successful integration into Finland through hard work and education. Peer tutors expressed to me how they themselves would have wished for models of successful foreigners in Finland when they were younger or when they had first arrived.

> Now I am a guy who is chasing dreams by book and paper, by book and pen. Like I am going to school, I want to be a [nurse]. You know because when I came here I was doing [paper delivery], two and a half years I was working outside in the snow. And I was doing [cleaning]" PT

> "[I tell them,] I was hoping to get this, I wanted to pass, I was hoping to pass [examinations]. It's hope that got me there. So you can do it. PT

6.2.4 Peer Tutor as Ambassador

In addition to serving as examples of successfully navigating in the Finnish society, peer tutors would frequently adopt a role that I call the ambassador. I am distinguishing the previously described role of mentor/role model from this one of the ambassador.

Where a role model is something that a child can look up to, learn from, and potentially want to emulate, the ambassador, here, serves more external ends.

At the time of research, immigration was a topic of heated discussion in Finland. It had become increasingly politicized during the 2000's with the 2008 electoral victory of the political party *True Finns, Perussuomalaiset*, and the provocative statements of its so-called immigration critics (see Pyrhönen 2013). It seemed like everyone was forced to take a stand concerning immigration issues.

A significant part of the ambassador role had to do with coping with racism. Peer tutors would talk about their own experiences of racism and violence with me, and share how they had adopted a non-violent stance, and advised the children to do the same.

> I also tell them the experience I have, like yesterday […] I was telling them how people used to attack me with words, like racist words on the bus and in Helsinki, just to let them know, hey I go through this, and it's okay. You know because when they see you laugh about it, and then you tell them what you tell the people back, it sticks in their head and they tell the people back. I just tell them, don't fight. Never hit. […] I came to know hey, this is my life I'm joking with. Finland needs people, but they don't need violent people. PT

Peer tutors wanted to explain to the children what was expected of them in the Finnish society; that they obey the law and become taxpayers for Finland. At the same time, they often offered a representation of Finland as a generous country that treats people fairly and is free of corruption. Many of the children came from countries with high corruption and poor social security. Peer tutors would explain how things work in Finland, that tax funds are used toward public services such as health care. Also, they would frequently remind the children of things that they had received from the Finnish government.

> I tell them, Finnish system […] they need kids like you, to train you to have a better life. And then the society will benefit from you, too, because

it's fifty-fifty. You don't tell me they are paying for school for nothing, they want you to be a better human being to contribute to the society. PT

This is a country even if someone attacks you with words you can tell the police, it works. PT

We always try to educate them, give orientation about rules and regulations, rules and law. PT

The ambassador role raises some questions of what it is like to live as an immigrant in Finland. Coping with racism and outright violence was a recurrent topic of conversation on our train rides. This seemed to affect especially the young men, who had learned to live a life of vigilance, and to avoid certain situations. One wonders whether this is something that the peer tutors pass on to the children, the sense of having to survive in a somewhat hostile place. Does this reflect the attitudes of society on a larger scale, that racism is something that is inevitable, something to cope with, and that this coping is ultimately the responsibility of the immigrant?

6.2.5 Peer Tutor as Advocate

Sometimes the children would turn to peer tutors for advice on specific things relating to life in Finland and also the asylum process, although this was not a role specifically assigned to them. The children had an appointed representative, and also were placed in the care of the group homes. However, the representatives, while present for official hearings and procedures, were not usually a part of the everyday life of the children.[12]

The bond that the children had with Safety Net peer tutors meant that peer tutors were sometimes approached with problems in the asylum process. Peer tutors could not, of course, offer any legal counseling, but could sometimes remind the children of their

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[12] For a detailed description of the role of the representative, see Rauma (2011).

right to appeal a decision, or refer them to their representatives or the right person in any given situation.

> […] for example if someone hasn't received a residence permit, we can talk about their situation […] the process, that they can appeal with the help of their representative or lawyer […] we can give advice on what is possible for them. PT

It also occurred at times, that a peer tutor could act as a spokesperson for a child in difficult situations with group home staff. An example that was described to me was of an occasion where a member of staff had criticized certain children for their attire on cultural grounds. The children had been sad and offended, and had come to a peer tutor with their complaints, which had then been taken to the group home leader, and the problem in question had been resolved.

Peer tutors could also in some situations act as interpreters for the children and clear up small misunderstandings, when staff and the children did not share the same language.

> We are not officially interpreters, but cultural interpreting we do a lot of. […] if in the reception centers they don't have [staff] of their own language, they ask us, could you tell him, he didn't understand what I meant. We do a lot of this. PT

Again, this was not a role that was planned for initially by project Safety Net. However, in the isolated context described earlier, it could be a very significant one. Group home staff have a strong authority over the children. While the staff I encountered and the relations I observed them having with the children were not only professional but also warm and affectionate, having outside contacts to approach with any potential conflicts or misunderstandings could be important in a context such as this.

> I think it is essential that they have this […] third party, which they are always looking for, consciously or unconsciously. What they tell us they don't tell [staff]. PT

Peer tutors also expressed that they observed the emotional wellbeing of the children, and tried to understand the reasons for their distress. Sometimes, they would refer them to their social worker to help them seek counseling.

> We observe their psychological situation, is everything okay. That is our main role. Why is she not happy? It is such a big question. Is her, does her issue have to do with residence permit, is she missing her mother, father or others, or home, why is she like this? We have to deal with this, that is why we are here with them." PT

> If that thing is beyond me I just tell him, you should talk to your social worker […] or therapist […] so if it's beyond me, I try to direct them to go there. PT

6.3 The How of Peer Support: The Nature of Project Safety Net

I will now turn to the nature of project Safety Net, and describe the foundations of the peer network. I will also discuss the project's significance from the perspective of the peer tutors.

6.3.1 Building a Peer Network: The Safety Net Family

Safety Net was first conceived of within the Finnish Refugee Council. The NGO had experience with peer support through the Face-to-Face peer training program. Also, they had previously started another project supporting youth from immigrant backgrounds in finding their place in society, and were looking for other ways to support refugee children. (Muma 2014a.)

Once staff had been employed in 2012, the starting point for project Safety Net was to find and train peer tutors. Many had been found through the peer training program that

the Finnish Refugee Council had had for several years, and the network had grown gradually mainly through word-of-mouth. Several peer tutors had also joined as students, completing their practical training at the Finnish Refugee Council, and staying on as peer tutors for project Safety Net. (Muma 2014a.)

It was clear from the beginning of research that language was a fundamental feature in project Safety Net peer support. So, too, was the peer aspect of it, the understanding that was developed through shared experiences, in accordance to Mead's definition of peer support discussed in chapter 4.2.

One of the objectives of Safety Net was to build a mutually supportive network not only for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, but also for the peer tutors themselves. The project seemed to have achieved this, and friendships persisted even outside of the scope of the project itself. Again, familial terms were often used. Peer tutors repeatedly referred to each other as brothers and sisters, and perhaps most significantly, to the project director as a mother figure or an "auntie".

It became very clear that solidarity, personal attachments, and also practical assistance with different issues exceeded the limits of the project. A particularly emotional moment in which I witnessed these emotional bonds, was a Safety Net training day at the end of my fieldwork period. This specific day was also the last day of work for the project director, who had accepted another position working with refugees outside of Finland.

Farewell speeches delivered to the project director were intensely warm and affectionate, but also filled with accounts of assistance received during hard times. Many said the project director had changed their lives, even to the extent that a peer tutor was moved to say, "You have given me life. You work for me, yet you pay me." It was evident that the project director had a tremendous personal influence in building the peer network. However, the overall sentiment on her last day seemed to be that Safety Net could and would function equally well under a new leadership. My fieldwork ended at a significant moment in the history of the project, and it would be interesting to see how peer support continued from there.

Besides personal attachments, the network and commitment to the project was reinforced through a high level of participation in the project on many levels. The values of the project were forged collectively. Much attention was given to regularly discussing peer support work.

Another important aspect in network building were the train rides that peer tutors took together on each Safety Net visit. They provided an opportunity to get acquainted on a personal level and also to discuss how the visits had gone. When a new peer tutor came into the peer support network, he/she would after training join a group of more experienced tutors and they would talk him/her through the first time. Project staff, consisting of the director and a part-time project coordinator, committed themselves to administrational duties, and the actual work of the peer tutors was left to themselves completely.

6.3.2 Benefits for Tutors

The personal friendships and mutually supportive network described above was a clear benefit for the peer tutors, as was the help and support that they received in solving practical issues in their own lives as immigrants to Finland. The project director at the time describes in her blog how difficult it can be for a foreigner to find an apartment, and how she and others in the peer support network have helped and even taken in peer tutors in difficult times:

> For months now, during our spare time, we have been searching for an apartment in the Helsinki area for our peer tutor. Bawa received his residence permit last year, but an apartment is hard to come by. He has stayed with friends, in different places each week, filled in forms, visited rental offices and open houses, and read the classified ads, and I and other tutors have helped out. It seems that everything comes to a halt because he is an immigrant, not fluent in Finnish, his middle name is Mohamed, he is black and comes from Togo. (Muma 2013, translation mine.)

Finding employment can also be difficult for immigrants, and many of the peer tutors were students. The monetary compensation they received for Safety Net visits provided a welcome source of income. Many peer tutors also commented on the importance of feeling useful and being able to do something valuable.

Some peer tutors felt that they benefited in many of the same ways the children benefited from project Safety Net. The peer tutors themselves, having had many of the same experiences that the children were going through, were able to reflect on their own past experiences. Activities such as camps provided a welcome change also for the peer tutors, who commented on the different exotic Finnish encounters in much the same way the children did.

6.4. Obstacles and Hindrances

In the relatively short time period during which my fieldwork took place, Safety Net underwent many changes, both internal and external. There was a constant need to adapt to different circumstances. Toward the end of my fieldwork, the project exhausted its funds for a period of time, and could not send the usual peer tutor groups to group homes for some weeks. This situation was solved by the project coordinator, being a paid staff member, conducting the visits until a grant from a foundation was received. The project coordinator was indeed a peer tutor herself, and well-liked by the children, but the diversity of the peer tutors, and the multiplicity of languages was lost for that period in time. As for many projects, for project Safety Net too, funding was a central concern.

There were other significant changes, too. During fieldwork came the announcement of the closing down of Harjulinna group home in Siuntio. This meant that half of the weekly visits would cease, but also having to part with Harjulinna children and staff, both of whom many peer tutors reported having an especially close bond with. Interestingly, on my last visit to Harjulinna I learned that many of the children had received positive decisions on their asylum applications. Even though the applications

of underage asylum seekers are officially handled as urgent, it seems that an external factor might sometimes accelerate the process.

The closing of Harjulinna was a major change for staff, children and peer tutors alike. Like the project director writes in her blog on January 16th, 2014,

> Both the children and we at Safety Net are dumbfounded. The whole minor unit is reacting strongly to the change. All the children will be transferred to other units across Finland, and staff will be unemployed. […] The children want to process their situation and their future with the peer tutors in their own language. There has been a lot of change in their lives, and here is yet another unexpected event to adjust to. Safety Net tutors are going through this change with the children. (Muma 2014b, translation mine.)

The change in leadership was another considerable transition that the project was embarking on at the end of my fieldwork. This was augmented by the personal meaning that the project director had had, both personally for individuals and also in the forming of the Safety Net community. The effects of this transition fall outside the scope of this research, but in my view, at the time the general mood was optimistic.

On a more practical level, some of the reported difficulties were related to communication issues with the group homes. On the visits I attended, there was often some confusion as to what the plan for the day was supposed to be, and on more than one occasion there were some activities in the group homes that coincided with Safety Net visits, regardless of the fact that Safety Net had been visiting regularly on the same weekday and time, for more than a year. I was also told that on a previous occasion one specific visit had been called off by group home staff as a disciplinary measure. This was felt to undermine the work of the peer tutors and send a message that the value of Safety Net was not fully recognized.

One issue was the difference between the institutional natures of project Safety Net and the group homes. Safety Net is a project with a shifting and fast project nature, whereas the group homes are more bureaucratic units, strictly controlled and slower to react.

Sometimes there had been failure on the part of Safety Net to understand how much in advance certain plans should be communicated. Strict rules such as regulations of the children's use of the kitchen facilities had also been a topic of conversation between Safety Net and group home staff.

Notwithstanding the communication issues described above, both parties expressed a good experience of cooperation, and that communication between the two had consistently improved during the course of the project. The relations between group homes and Safety Net were overwhelmingly reported as positive, and both parties spoke very highly of each other. All of the staff members I communicated with expressed respect for the work of Safety Net and the people involved. Peer tutors also consistently spoke to the children very highly about group home staff.

6.5 The Significance of Safety Net

Today, the majority of the unaccompanied minor asylum seekers that arrive in Finland eventually receive asylum. Their time in the group homes marks a crucial transition period, during which significant social relations could be of pivotal importance. Relying on my data, I am suggesting that Safety Net has found a niche in the system, which has enabled it to serve an important role in the transition of many of the children.

The most self-evident function of Safety Net is the emotional support and therapeutic value provided by peer tutors through providing the opportunity to work through the difficult experiences that the children have had and are going through. Also, there is the importance of offering fun and happiness as a relief to the pressing situation that the children are in.

However, there are other functions that I have described through the different roles of peer tutors. My interpretation is that peer tutors can situate themselves between the refugee experience and that of being an alien, and a picture of successful adaptation in the Finnish society. The children can both identify with the peer tutors as people with shared experiences, and look up to them as examples of what their own future might

look like some day. In the process of receiving and providing peer support, the children find in the peer tutors reliable guides into the exotic landscape that they find themselves in, and the peer tutors strengthen both their identity as immigrants and their growing roots in Finland. However, there is a deeper level to this in-between stance that I wish to address in this final chapter.

7 The Asylum Process, Refugee Representations, and Project Safety Net

During the research process I became interested in the representations of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in the asylum process. What is the picture painted of these children like, and what purposes does it serve? How does project Safety Net conform to or challenge these representations? I will now explore these questions using the work of Liisa Malkki as a theoretical base.

According to Malkki (1995a, 8–14) there is a tendency in the realm of refugee politics and humanitarian interventions, as well as within research, to universalize and generalize refugees. This universalization process occurs in both textual and visual representations, to the extent that "the refugee" becomes an ideal-typical figure.

Refugees are also seen as a problem:

> It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates 'the problem' not first in the political oppression or violence that produces massive territorial displacements of people, but within the bodies and minds of people classified as refugees. (Malkki 1995a, 8.)

Malkki (1996) also describes how this archetypal refugee as the object of different kinds of humanitarian and government action has become the standardized way of representing refugees by different agents of development as well as in the media. As a

result of this representation, Malkki argues that people in the refugee category are routinely silenced. The universalized and dehistoricized silent refugee is difficult to see as an agent.

What, then, is the position of Safety Net in all of this? Undoubtedly, it cannot be immune to the silencing and dehistoricizing processes that occur in relation to refugees. Malkki (1996) writes, for example about questions of the moral right of refugees to have certain elements of wellbeing and about the obligation of gratitude. These are themes that are abundantly present in the Finnish immigration discourse. There is the underlying thought that refugees and immigrants have to prove themselves worthy both economically and through their general behavior, and remain grateful to the Finnish society for received benefits.

To some extent, this was also the message conveyed to the children by peer tutors. When acting as "ambassadors" for Finland, they urged the children to become respectable citizens and taxpayers, and to be grateful for everything that they have received during the asylum process. I believe adopting this kind of stance is almost unavoidable in the current political atmosphere. But again, silenced are the questions of global inequality or those of the emotional consequences of the asylum process for the children.

Racism, as mentioned earlier, was another theme that seemed to be inevitable, something ever-present or somehow even natural to many peer tutors. They stressed the importance of non-violence and not fighting back, shrugging it off. Here, the silencing of refugees is continued by adopting a view of the refugee/immigrant as being ultimately responsible for dealing with racism or even violence.

However, and more importantly, I would argue that Safety Net provides several important counter-representations. Where silencing, neglect of narratives, and distancing are the norm, Safety Net consistently *seeks out* narratives, and bridges distances. Next, I will analyze some of these counter-representations that I believe Safety Net offers.

7.1 Words and Images

In the light of the case described in this thesis, I would argue that there is indeed a silencing process when it comes to unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, and the silencing of the children occurs by different ways of distancing. Distancing and dehistoricizing, then, serve to divert attention away from the pressing questions of global inequality that brought the children to this country in the first place, as well as from the effects that the asylum process itself may have on them.

One way of distancing the children as whole human beings with histories is through the use of the special lexicon of asylum bureaucracy. In this thesis, I have intentionally mostly referred to the children as children, and to the group homes as group homes, but these are not the official terms used by the immigration service. In the language of bureaucracy, the children are *unaccompanied minor asylum seekers*, and the group homes are *underage units* or *special reception centers*. This wording does not have the feel of describing the real flesh-and-blood human beings living their real lives, but instead serves as a distancing tool.

Another peculiar detail in the wordings of the Finnish Immigration Service is the use of the expression *refusal of entry* in the circumstance of a negative asylum decision (Finnish Immigration Service 2014a). Clearly, the children have already entered. At the time that they receive the decision, many of them have, in fact, been in the country for several months or even years, attending school and living their lives. *Refusal of entry* is a curious denial of their existence, and one that underlines their liminality, as if they were not in fact here, but on a border wishing to enter. This expression can also be seen as blurring the reality of what Immigration Service is doing, which is removing a person from this country.

Malkki also describes the silencing of refugees through visual representation. Borrowing from Feldman, she describes the "anonymous corporeality" that characterizes the visual representation of refugees:

> No names, no funny faces, no distinguishing marks, no esoteric details of personal style enter, as a rule into the frame of pictures of refugees when they are being imagined as a sea of humanity. (Malkki 1996, 388.)

This kind of representation serves to fade out the actual narratives and histories of the real people involved. Malkki also notes that there exists much more of this kind of wordless visual material in news reports than there are actual verbal accounts by refugees themselves.

In the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, all visual representation in which the identity of individuals could potentially be recognized, is explicitly prohibited. This is presented as a safety measure, for the children could be at risk if knowledge of their whereabouts were to reach the wrong people. But as a result, the literature about them and any material hoping to promote their cause is filled with faceless dark figures, always seen from the back or from a distance, or as dark silhouettes. In a way, once a child asylum seeker reaches Finland, he/she becomes even more unrecognizable and faceless than the archetypal figure of the suffering child refugee that dominates the imagery of international news.

I myself became confronted with my own stereotypical ideas of child asylum seekers upon my very first encounter with them. The very diversity of the bunch that met me caught me off guard. There seemed to be every kind of child from the shy Afghan girl to the witty and educated Iraqi boy with perfect knowledge of English, from the Angolan boy with a passion for art to the Ethiopian girl dreaming of becoming an engineer. In retrospect it is impossible for me to put my finger on exactly *who* it was that I actually was anticipating, but from my surprised reaction it is embarrassingly obvious that I had some sort of picture in mind.

Here, Safety Net provides an important counter-representation. I have already referred to the family relationships constantly evoked between both peer tutors themselves and between peer tutors and the children. The children are not seen as distant minors living in minor units, but instead one could argue as the exact opposite: as family members.

Sharing and also being physically affectionate were ways of intentionally keeping the children close. This peer tutor quote, I believe, is illustrative.

> They need love and attention from other people than officials. They need listening. We are human and humans need other humans. They are children you know and they need a lot of touch. PT

Here, the peer tutor explicitly evokes a picture of a shared humanity, not the stripped bare humanity described by Malkki, but the fundamental way that humans are dependent on each other and that makes us all alike. In this short quote, the peer tutor recognizes individual needs for love, attention, listening, and touch; and also reminds us that the children are, in fact, children.

There were many other ways in which Safety Net activities actively sought out individual narratives. An example of this was a party where there was a fashion show with people dressed up in their traditional clothing, and where the children were also able to express their different talents. I was able to witness this as I joined the children as they watched a video recording of the event and reminisced. No faceless silhouettes this time, but instead a colorful peek into the histories and talents that each individual child had.

7.2 Isolation

Another distancing technique that I have referred to earlier is very concrete and physical, that is, the location of the child asylum seekers in remote places. *Out of sight, out of mind* is a saying that leaps to mind when visiting these places. And like I quoted earlier, one of the children expressed this in the following way: "[it is] because we are refugees, everyone hates us".

This boy had, after a brief stay in Finland, formed his own interpretation of the distancing that he and everyone else could see and feel. Undoubtedly, there is much to say about attitudes toward refugees and immigrants in the Finnish society. But the

physical distancing of child asylum seekers can also be seen as another form of the silencing of refugees that Malkki describes.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I encountered a peculiar symbol of this silencing-by-distancing. I went to see an art exhibition that the children of Harjulinna had created in collaboration with two art students, as part of a project.[13] The exhibition was held in a gallery on the fortress island of Suomenlinna, off the coast of Helsinki. One first had to take a ferry, and then walk for almost half an hour on the island to get to the gallery. There were no signs, and even with the aid of a map the location was difficult to find for a first-time visitor.

Once there, my companion and I opened the door to a gallery room quite large in size. It happened to be completely empty of people. The walls were hung with the paintings and stories of the Harjulinna children, and photographs of Harjulinna, which was being closed down at the time. There was no staff or other people present at any time during our visit to the exhibition. There was a sound installation playing the voices of the children sharing their thoughts in their respective languages. As we left, the voices I could so easily recognize were left talking to the deaf walls of the empty gallery, and I was left wondering whether we were the only people ever to see the exhibition.

This felt like a final extension of the isolation I have described earlier: that even the children's artwork would be situated in a location – a 1800th century military fortress no less – where very few would see it or hear the children's voices. During the course of fieldwork, I wondered whether it was indeed intentional that the whole existence of this group of people be held from public view. If so, the silencing has happened successfully. Whenever I told friends and acquaintances about my research project, many expressed that they indeed did not know about unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.

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[13] From the Helsinki International Artist Programme website: "*State of waiting* is an exhibition made in collaboration with unaccompanied underage asylum seekers living in Finland. The installations reflect the experiences of the youth living in the middle of the asylum seeking process and invite the audience to consider their own relationship to otherness and asylum seekers. … The exhibition is supported by Finnish Children and Youth Foundation's *Myrsky* project, Siuntio Reception Centre and HIAP – Helsinki International Artist Programme." The exhibition was held in February 2014 in Gallery Augusta.

Breaking the isolation was an important part of Safety Net work. This would happen physically through visiting the children, but also through taking them on different trips and visits. Visits to the city center were frequently commented on by the children as something important and refreshing. Also, going on camps was seen as a relief from constantly staying in the isolated group home. These visits were important also in the sense of experiencing positive contacts with Finnish people.

> [Camp is] an experience, for them and for me. […] when we grill the fish, you know, there's nowhere like this in Espoo. […] For just two days they feel good. They meet people, new people, I mean most Finns. They meet mostly Finns, they interact with the natives. It's a good experience, and it changes me and them, it changes my idea about Finns. Because some of us, or most of us think Finnish don't like foreigners. But here we are with Finns, making fishes on the fire for us, talking to us, shaking hands, sleeping close to us, eating together. PT

Juxtaposing this view with the previously mentioned one concerning isolation: "Because we are refugees, everybody hates us", makes it very clear how isolation breeds suspicion and animosity, and genuine interaction does the opposite.

7.3 Distrust

Another characteristic of the silenced archetypal refugee is that the general stereotype of the suffering refugee is accepted, but ironically, when moving to the particular, a refugee's credibility weakens.

> The truth of "suffering strangers" as a categorical moral subject is not doubted; it is even sacralized. In contrast, the particularity of a single person's "stories" and "claims" is suspect. (Malkki 2007b.)

Also, physical evidence of suffering takes precedence over personal accounts. Malkki (2007b) gives the example of Rwanda, where rape was widespread during the political

crisis and genocide of the 1990's. This was commonly accepted as fact, but yet the Rwandan rape victims had to verify their trauma through physical examinations.

In the asylum process of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, the supremacy of the physical over the verbalized is most clearly visible in the age determination procedures. Although the procedures have been found unreliable for the age group in question, and there are considerable ethical questions regarding the use of potentially harmful medical procedures for forensic purposes (Abbing 2011), age determination procedures are nevertheless given authority over statements of the children.

One of the stressors of the asylum process is the suspicion that asylum seekers face, and this is part of the silencing of their narratives; they are simply taken as untrue, or at least something that carries the burden of proof. As Malkki writes:

> They were frequently regarded as unreliable informants. There was also a more general tendency among some (though by no means all) administrators to characterize the refugees as dishonest, prone to exaggeration, even crafty and untrustworthy. […] Their bodies were made to speak to doctors and other professionals, for the bodies could give a more reliable and relevant accounting than the refugees' "stories". (Malkki 1996, 384, quotation marks in original.)

This is an account of the attitudes of Tanzanian officials toward Hutu refugees, but I believe it is true in a more general sense, simply because this kind of representation is needed for the feasibility of asylum policies. I am by no means offering an analysis of the language of the Finnish Immigration Service, but when perusing its statistical reports for some facts and figures, I could not help but notice the many allusions to the exposing of impostors. A few examples suffice:

> Somali citizens have undergone numerous language examinations, on the grounds of which those in need of at least subsidiary protection, applicants from the Mogadishu area, have often been identifiable (Finnish Immigration Service 2011, translation mine).

> More and more, information on a visa issued by another member state is
> found out, even if the applicant does not himself report the existence of the
> visa (Finnish Immigration Service 2014d, translation mine).
>
> Of these decisions, 6 were concerning asylum applicants that were
> considered at the time of the decision unaccompanied underage asylum
> seekers (Finnish Immigration Service 2014d, translation mine).[14]

The last quote is particularly illustrative. It describes persons that the authorities
themselves have deemed unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, and yet it seems to go
out of its way to remind the reader, that they were merely *considered* that *at the time*.
There is still the possibility that at any moment, the real truth might be revealed.

Here, Safety Net again takes a different stance. Acting as the third party, the peer tutors
explicitly listen to and believe the narratives of the children. I believe this quote from a
peer tutor illustrates the general attitude within the project:

> Verbally they said, "you are liars […] you are not the person you say you
> are on your passport", this kind […] they cried a lot, I called every day
> […] And when even staff see them as liars, they believe the officials. I
> don't think a child is a liar. Why does a child lie if not afraid of
> something? And why is the child afraid?

In this quote, this peer tutor bridges the distance in several ways, and explicitly not only
states that a child should not be seen as fundamentally dishonest, but also brings forth
the question of the reasons behind a situation where lying might be the best policy.
Also, the child in question is seen as a feeling human being, and the emotional
consequences of the asylum process are made visible. This situation also shows the
close relationships between peer tutors and children, which sometimes spread way
beyond the once-a-week visit.

There is a curious gap between how refugees are seen before and after they enter the
country that they seek asylum in, in this case Finland. There is, first, the universalized

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[14] The quote in Finnish reads as follows: "Näistä päätöksistä 6 koski päätöshetkellä alaikäisenä,
yksintulleena pidettyä turvapaikanhakijaa."

refugee as "an embodiment of pure humanity (and as a pure victim)" (Malkki 1995a, 12), the images of suffering women and children and masses of people fleeing war and famine. These are people that evoke sympathy and pity, and are the object of humanitarian interventions. Once they become asylum seekers in the West, however, the picture is transformed. In accordance with exclusive asylum politics, the innocent victim becomes a deceitful alien whose motives are to be questioned and about whom the real truth must be unveiled.

The sentiment that refugees are essentially dishonest opportunists is illustrated in the rationale behind the Dublin Convention. A brief news comment in the Lancet describes this well:

> The Convention is part of an EU effort to clarify which country is responsible for handling a request for asylum. It is also designed to stop people "shopping around" in Europe for the best refugee "deal". … According to EU officials, it has been a common practice for asylum seekers to lodge applications for refugee status in several countries. (Birchard 1997, quotation marks in original)

Somehow the fact that asylum might be sought in several countries implies "shopping around" for the best "deal". This is, of course, not an inevitable interpretation. Rather, one can well ask whether a more obvious reading of asylum seekers' motivations would be that they are simply seeking for asylum where they can.

Malkki, discussing the liminal state of the asylum seeker, recalls classics of ritual studies, such as Victor Turner's 1967 Betwixt and Between:

> […] transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least 'betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in the space-time of cultural classification (Turner 1967, quoted in Malkki 1995a, 7).

65

Refugees pose a danger because of this blurring of meanings, and also they blur concrete borders and categories of nationals and foreigners. Therefore, they are represented as posing a threat to national security. (Malkki 1995a, 7–8.) Suspicion is perhaps a necessary sentiment for perpetuating the present asylum politics. In fact, if an asylum seeker is found to be a liar, he/she is probably not in need of asylum at all.

I believe that suspicion is particularly necessary in the case of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, simply because the very idea of children fleeing persecution or danger alone is profoundly disturbing. It forces us to take responsibility for their safety and wellbeing. There is a profound incongruity between the emotions that child asylum seekers evoke and the exclusive immigration politics that exist in the West and especially Finland. Is it not easier, then, to either forget about this group of human beings completely, or think of them as despicably deceitful or potentially dangerous?

8 Conclusions

This thesis is an ethnographic case study of project Safety Net, a peer support project for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in southern Finland. Project Safety Net provides psychosocial peer support through weekly visits by peer tutors, who have a refugee background and speak the languages spoken by the children in the group homes that they live in. I have offered an analysis of what peer support is needed for in this case, how it works, and what its benefits might be. In addition, this thesis addresses the question of the representations of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in the Finnish asylum process, and examines the relationship of project Safety Net to those representations.

My first research question concerned the life situations of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. What are the different aspects that peer support is likely to be needed for and affect?

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers are children that have been separated from their family. In addition to this separation or loss, a salient aspect of their life situation is liminality that manifests itself in many ways. Their daily existence in the group homes is known to be temporary regardless of the decision that they eventually receive, but their next destination is unknown. The social relations that the children form, whether with other children in the home or with staff members, are also temporary. The wait is also characterized by uncertainty and fear concerning the type of decision they will receive. While many experience relief of being safe, the children often also carry with them the potentially traumatic events of the past and the flight itself. Liminality also entails putting dreams and plans on hold, and a disruption in the common adolescent developmental tasks of gaining independence, coming to terms with sexuality, and identity formation.

The physical location of the group homes is isolated, and seclusion and boredom are major issues for many unaccompanied asylum seekers. There are not many opportunities for social relations or recreational activities. In addition, there is the stress of not being able to express oneself completely due to language issues, and other additional stressors related to moving from one environment to a completely different one.

Secondly, I wanted to examine how exactly peer support might address or alleviate these issues, and what the benefits of the project are for children and for tutors. I found that peer support works through different roles that the peer tutors embody. I identified five different peer tutor roles. First, the peer tutor as friend is found to provide relief from boredom, opportunities for connection and sharing, emotional support, confidential relationships, and fun getaways and experiences.

Another peer tutor role addresses the separation from family that unaccompanied minors face. Children expressed explicitly that peer tutors can take the role of a mother or brother where the real one is not present. The peer tutor as family could also evoke, in a positive sense, memories from home that could alleviate homesickness.

The third peer tutor role is that of a mentor or role model. Children receive guidance and practical knowledge, as well as positive role models of well-adjusted immigrants and former refugees. The mentor peer tutor can promote self-esteem and offer opportunities for positive social roles. As mentors, peer tutors also encourage the children to strive for success in their studies and language skills.

Fourth, I found the role of the ambassador. This role entails offering a positive representation of the Finnish society and explaining the rules that should be followed in order to succeed in it. The ambassador peer tutor stresses the value of employment and work, becoming a law-abiding citizen, and adopting a non-violent stance toward racism.

The fifth and final role I found for the peer tutors is the role of the advocate. Peer tutors will sometimes act as spokespersons for the children, in addition to acting as cultural interpreters. They can refer the children to appropriate specialists in different issues, whether concerning the asylum process or the emotional wellbeing of the children.

I suggest that peer support is a significant source of relief for the children, albeit not to the same extent for every individual child. The benefits of peer support experienced by the children are listed above in connection to peer tutor roles. But the peer tutors were also found to benefit. They enjoy the experiences they have with the project, find meaningful activity and a source of income, and above all enjoy a close network with other tutors.

As my third research question, I asked what features of project Safety Net make the peer support process described above possible. What are factors that can be hindrances to it? My most important finding here is the irrefutable significance of language. In my opinion, the backbone of the project – even more than the peer aspect of "refugeeness" – is the use of the children's own languages.

Another powerful feature of this project is the familial culture and mutual solidarity of the peer tutor network. In my view, the project has been successful in building a culture of trust and friendship that enables good cooperation and mutual support. This is further supported by training and a high level of participation in project planning.

Hindering factors have to do, first, with shifting circumstances, both within the project itself and in the context in which it operates. The internal changes are related to funding issues and changes in leadership, while contextual changes have to do with the closing down of one of the two group homes.

Second, there are sometimes communication gaps between the project and the group homes. Third, the significance of language, while being the forte of the whole project, also causes situations, in which some children became closer to peer tutors than others.

The second major section of my analysis turned to my fourth research question. What kinds of refugee representations exist in the asylum process, and what is the relationship of project Safety Net to these representations? Drawing from the work of Malkki, I found that elements of the asylum process serve to distance and silence unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.

Malkki describes how, in both policy, media, and research, refugees are often universalized, generalized, and problematized. Their personal narratives are silenced or discredited, and thus their agency is washed out. I argue that similar processes occur in the asylum process faced by unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Finland, and that project Safety Net offers important ways to counter this silencing and bridging these distances. I go further to ask whether there is a need for this kind of distancing for the perpetuation of the current exclusive immigration policies.

Distancing works in many ways. First, there is the way of silencing through the use of distancing language, as well as through anonymizing imagery. Second, there is the physical distancing that happens through the isolation of the children to distant locations. Third, there is the loss of credibility and suspicion that the children face in the asylum seeking process. My claim is that project Safety Net serves as a challenging and mitigating force against the distancing and silencing processes. It does this by actively seeking out, listening to, and believing emotions and narratives, and breaking the isolation in different ways.

This study is limited in scope, but provides a window into the themes it addresses. There are many openings it provides into how these questions might be further elaborated in future research, be it from a longitudinal perspective on the ways that received support might affect the lives of young people adjusting to the Finnish society, or a more comprehensive ethnographic-postcolonial study of the representational aspects of the asylum process.

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